

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1996

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by JAN BURKE

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across
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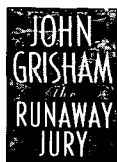
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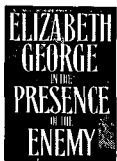
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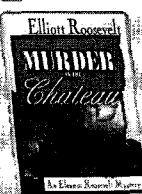
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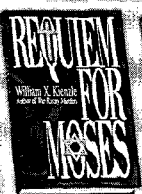
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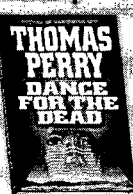
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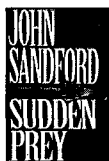
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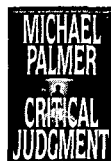
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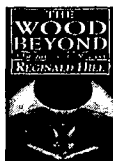


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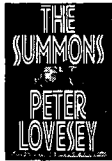
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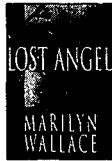
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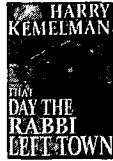
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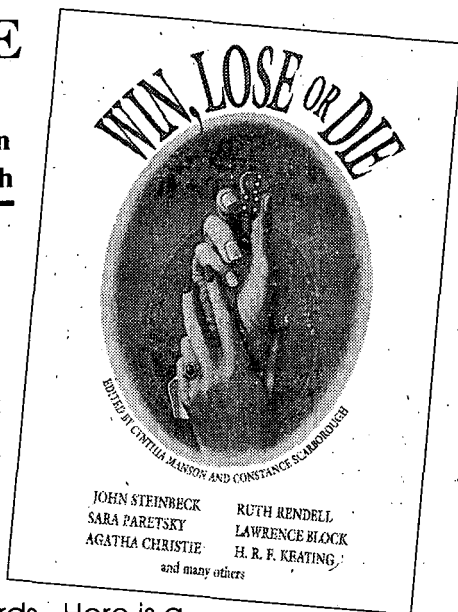
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Three new authors join us in this issue, we're pleased to say: Bentley Dadmun, Marlys Huffman, and Sharon Mackey.

Ms. Huffman, who brings us "Friend of the Sheriff," is an Oregonian. Now retired, she was most recently a title and insurance clerk for a credit union. She has published several previous stories and is the author of a novel, *Afternoon of the Gosling* (Zebra, 1989); in addition she writes humor articles and does gag writing for cartoonists. "At one time," she says, "I was employed by Firestone Tire, which accounts for the tires in this story."

Ms. Mackey, a former math and science teacher and presently a full-time mother of two, lives in Corbin, Kentucky. She took up snorkeling in St. John

last summer; at home she is president of the Berries and Begonia Garden Club. Her poem "The Tryst" won first place in the 1996 Women in the Arts contest. "Independence Day" is her first published story.

Mr. Dadmun, who works as a laborer, hails from New Hampshire, though he studied at the University of Wisconsin. "Down on the Farm" is his first published story also. Asked for biographical details, he wrote us, "What to say?—I am a bemused existentialist treading the same old ground and convinced it's unique." (But it is!)

We're also glad to be able to present new stories from John H. Dirckx ("A Noxious Drudge") and Nancy Simpson Hoke ("Green Tea"), both of them too long absent from AHMM.

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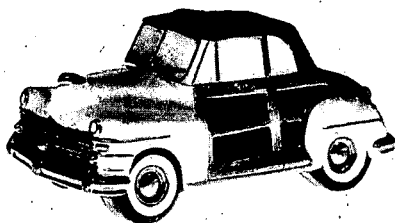
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White Trash

Jan Burke

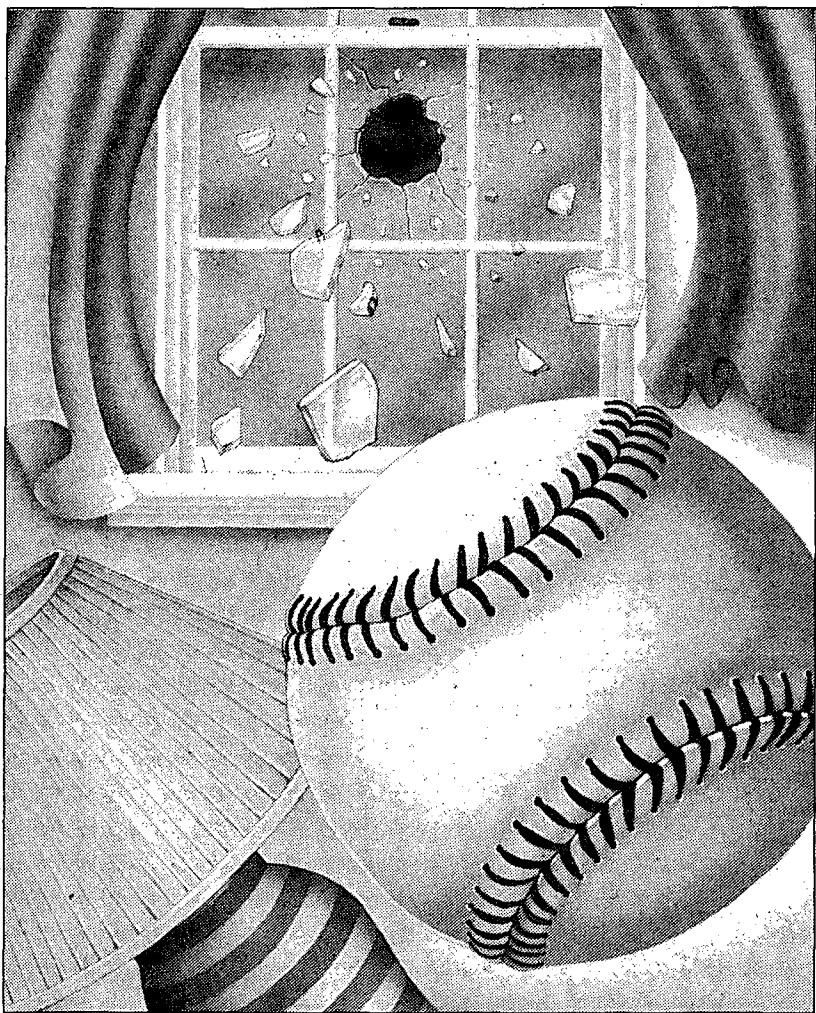


Illustration by Jon Weiman

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/96

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The woman dressed in black ninja garb moved stealthily across the street armed with a spray bottle of a popular herbicide purchased at her local hardware store. In the dim light of the street lamp she set the spray mechanism to "stream" and went to work. Quickly she moved the bottle in a graceful, sweeping motion. She left as furtively as she had arrived.

Three weeks later, much to the horror of the jerks who lived across the street, a rather obscene directive appeared on their lawn, spelled out in dead grass letters. Alas for these evil neighbors, the Suburban Avenger had succeeded once again . . .

I looked up from my bowl of cornflakes and glanced across the street, wondering—just wondering, mind you—if I could get away with it.

In every nearly perfect suburban neighborhood, there is the family that makes it "nearly" instead of "perfect." In ours, it was the Nabbits. You could find the Nabbit residence without a house number. I would sometimes use its distinctive features to guide other people to my own home. "We live across the street from the house with the pickup truck parked on the lawn," I'd say. Or, "Look for the old mattress propped up against the side of the garage, then pull into

the driveway directly opposite the box springs."

Sarah Cummings, who owned the pristine property to the right of the Nabbits, had warned us about these troublemakers from the day we moved into the neighborhood. "I call them the 'Dag Nabbits,'" she said. "Nola Nabbit is a tramp. You watch. If Napoleon's army had been as big as the one that has marched through Nola's bedroom doors, they'd be speaking French in Moscow today. Daisy, the little girl, is okay. But the kid! He's a mess."

The kid was Ricky. Ricky Nabbit, I soon learned, was a frequent guest of the California Youth Authority. He had a seasonal habit of breaking into houses, shoplifting, and other purely selfish acts.

"As long as it's baseball season," Sarah told me, "we won't have any trouble. He's a baseball nut. But every winter—" here Sarah shivered "—he robs somebody."

When Sarah heard I would be working out of my home, she was elated. "Maybe you can help keep an eye on things," she said. Specifically she meant Ricky Nabbit.

We had moved into our house in the spring of the year when Ricky turned fourteen. I would watch him walk home from baseball practice at the nearby

park. Skinny, cleancut, and looking smartly athletic in his uniform, he wore a glove so often I had visions of him eating with the mitt on his left hand.

Sometimes I would see Ricky sitting on the front porch oiling his glove, while from inside the house I heard his mother and her boyfriend shouting obscenities at one another at the top of their lungs. Even with the doors and windows closed we could hear them. This was especially true during the months when Clyde Who Parks on the Front Lawn reigned over the household.

Clyde was, perhaps, no worse than his predecessors. No more a loudmouth lowlife than Belamy the Belcher (whose wide-ranging eructative skills included saying the word "breast" as he burped) or Horace the Hornblower (who honked his car horn at all hours as a mere introduction to rolling down his window and hollering, "Nola! Get your ass out here!"). These were not their real names, of course, but my husband and I used this system to refer to them when lamenting our luck.

Nola stayed with Clyde for most of the season but broke up with him just before the World Series with a world-class drunken brawl in the middle of the street. Nola got a shiner, Clyde got the boot.

Our doorbell rang a few days later, and when I looked through the peephole, I was surprised to see Daisy standing on our front porch. She had long blonde hair and beautiful green eyes but was shy and slightly overweight. She was carrying a big cardboard box full of canisters of candy.

She stammered out a good afternoon and asked if I would buy some candy for her church school fundraiser.

"Church school?" I asked.

She turned a deep red and stepped back. If she had been a turtle, I would have been looking at nothing but a shell. I waited, tried to smile my encouragement. She swallowed hard and then explained that she attended a private school operated by a church. The church she named was a conservative Christian sect.

Even though her church school was part of a denomination other than our own, I bought a canister, telling myself that I was doing my bit for ecumenism and good neighborly relations.

I was leaving the house some hours later and saw her returning home still carrying her box, looking weary and somewhat dejected. I noticed that the box was still nearly full.

"Daisy!" I called.

You would think I had fired a

shot over her head. She halted, shrank back, and nearly dropped the box. As I crossed the street toward her, her eyes grew wide.

I stopped a few feet away from her. Out of striking distance. She relaxed a little. "I just remembered," I said, "that I need some gifts for some clients. The candy would be perfect. Could I buy more?"

She looked at me in complete puzzlement.

"Perhaps those ones you have with you have been spoken for?"

She shook her head. "N-n-no," she said, finally coming out of her daze. "No, ma'am, they aren't."

I bought the rest of the box, and took it home. She thanked me politely and stared after me as I crossed the street. By the time I had set the candy inside my foyer and returned to my car, she had disappeared inside her house.

"What the hell are you doing buying all this candy?" my husband asked that night. "I thought you were trying to lose weight."

"You're so gallant," I said. "Now, by my count, there's a missing canister. Are you going to share any of it?"

He grinned and went to retrieve his pirated treasure, then unwrapped the foil covering on a chocolate morsel and hand-fed it to me. "Mmmm," I said.

"I agree," he said. "But are we converting to a new religion?"

I explained what had happened with Daisy.

"You," he said, "are too easy." "Gallant again."

A week later Ricky came by and asked if he could wash our car. "Sure," I said, and paid him a dollar more than he'd asked on the theory that honestly earned money might start to appeal to him. He washed our car every weekend until the rains started in November.

He was always charming and polite. My husband agreed that we were better off making a friend of this kid than an enemy. Sarah Cummings told me I'd live to regret my kindness.

With the November rains the Nabbits' lawn grew taller; fast-food containers littered their front yard. Their dog, a mangy basset hound that smelled as if it had never been bathed, continued to use neighbors' lawns as his outhouse. (If American factories had the output that dog did, we'd be the most productive country in the world.) Nola stayed up late and laughed louder than the music she played. When she left for work, the hound bayed all day.

The Suburban Avenger knew it was an old trick. She placed the paper bag filled with gathered dog droppings on the front

porch, set it on fire, rang the doorbell, and ran. With glee she watched Nola Nabbit stamp the fire out. You can use old tricks on some dogs, the Avenger mused...

The Cummingses put up a low wrought-iron fence and planted Italian cypress on the side that bordered the Nabbits. The Fredericks, on the other side, did the same, but planted rosebushes. The Cummingses called the police whenever the music was played after ten o'clock. Nola started turning the radio off exactly at ten and shouting, "Goodnight, you old bitch!" toward the Cummingses' house.

Around Thanksgiving Mrs. Ogden, a seventy-year-old woman who lived next door to us, asked me to keep an eye on her house while she paid an overnight visit to her granddaughter. When she returned, she discovered that her house had been burglarized; her jewelry, her stereo, a small television set, and her secret stash of cash were gone. I felt guilty even though Mrs. Ogden didn't blame me in the least. "You have to sleep sometime, honey," she said. "I wasn't hiring you as a guard. Who knows? Maybe I'll get some of it back. I etched my driver's license number on the stereo and the TV."

As it turned out, the thief was caught trying to fence Mrs. Og-

den's stereo and was later tried and convicted. The thief was Ricky Nabbit.

I didn't hear much about him for a couple of years. Sarah told me that he didn't get much of a sentence, partly because his father, who lived in a trailer park about five hundred miles north of us, had agreed to let Ricky live with him for a time.

About the time Ricky left, Nola got a new boyfriend. Doug seemed to be as rough a fellow as most of the others, but soon we all noticed a change. No loud fights or partying sounds late at night. The yard was cleaned up. The place still wasn't painted, the hound continued to leave its calling cards, and Nola drank less but still swore like a sailor. Still, on the whole, things seemed to improve. We couldn't even come up with a nickname for Doug.

"It's been fairly quiet," the neighbors would say to one another. They always looked at the Nabbit house when they said it.

Then Ricky came home.

He was over sixteen by that summer, and much taller. He had filled out, become stronger. He seemed less lively than he had been at fourteen, and there was a surliness in his expression that had not been there before.

At night we began to hear No-

la shouting. Doug left a week later. Daisy seemed quieter and paler. Of her, we only saw a girl carrying books to and from the house. And as I did every year, I bought a case of her candy. I was getting better at giving it away before my husband and I ate more than a single can of it.

Ricky's friends started coming over to the Nabbit house to play ball. Ricky had been kicked out of the baseball league some time before (for stealing more than bases from the opposing team), but his love of the game remained. He practiced on the front lawn.

"Hey, batter, batter," I would hear them chant, day in, day out. They played with a light plastic ball, shouted "I got it," "Foul ball," "No way am I out," and "Steeeee—riiiiiike!" as well as certain other remarks that would have cost a Boy Scout his good sportsmanship badge. Ricky was no Boy Scout.

The shouting and the noise were annoying, yet we saw no reason to lodge a complaint. They were just kids, after all. And as long as he was playing baseball, Ricky could be seen by his nervous neighbors, none of whom had welcomed him back.

Ricky ignored all of us. He became industrious enough to mount a light on the garage roof, illuminating his small playing field for night games of

catch. That this light also illuminated our bedroom was not something Ricky was thinking about. Ricky, we had discovered, didn't think about other people except as a means to an end.

The Suburban Avenger had been waiting for this night. The Nabbits' car had been parked in front of her house, doors unlocked. She secured the frozen anchovy under the seat springs, driver's side. She might not be present when the discovery was made; still she would know that revenge had been, well, reeked

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon in September when the hardball hit the bedroom window, shattering it. I was in another room and rushed in to see large shards of glass on my husband's pillow, splinters of glass everywhere else. If the game of catch had taken place a few hours earlier, or later . . . I ran outside.

Two boys, Ricky and a kid he called Ted, stared up at the broken window. Although no one else played baseball anywhere near my house, I suspect they would have run away without owning up to the damage. But to Ricky's great misfortune, Sarah had been in her front yard when the baseball was thrown.

Nola came out of her house, too, ready to defend her chick

against Sarah—until she saw the window.

"It's Ted's fault," Ricky said immediately. "He was supposed to catch it."

I reached down and picked up the ball, which had been prevented from going through the window by the screen.

"Hardball?" Nola shrieked. "What got into you, Ricky? Playing with a goddamned hardball!"

Ricky had no answer.

Looking nervously between Sarah and me, she grabbed onto her son's elbow and said, "This is going to come out of the money you earned at the swap meet, Ricky." I groaned inwardly, wondering which of my neighbors' stolen goods might be sold to pay for my window. "I think you owe this lady an apology," Nola went on. I got a grudging "Sorry" from Ricky and Ted.

She eyed the window. "I think I've got a piece of glass that might fit," she said. "Ricky can fix it."

"No, thanks," I said, envisioning Ricky with an opportunity to case my house for a future burglary. "I'd rather have a professional glass company do it."

The glass company charged forty-five dollars to fix the window. That left us with the clean-up. I did that myself. I told Ricky he could pay me back in five dollar increments over nine

weeks. He smiled and said that would be fine.

When the first payment was due and no five dollar bill appeared, I interrupted the next baseball game. A complicated tale of woe that would have won applause from Scheherazade was given to me, along with the information that Ted would be paying for the window, not Ricky.

"We'll have it tomorrow for sure," Ted said. Ricky just smiled.

My husband and I began arguing. I should have asked for all of the money from Nola on the day it happened, he said. I never should have made the agreement about the five dollars. I was too soft. I should have let him handle it. We were never going to see that forty-five dollars.

More days and more tales of woe, more smiles from Ricky and more arguments between my husband and me. Finally—after my husband refused to be budged from Nola's front doorstep, a payment was made. Twenty of the forty-five.

Sarah and I became better friends. It dawned on me that she had long sought an ally in her own battles with the Nabbits. "Don't let the Nabbits turn us into rabbits," she would proclaim.

At eleven P.M. the Suburban

Avenger sought her secret weapon. The baseball game had just ended, but the lights were still glaring on the field. The Nabbits had driven off to the store to buy more beer. The Avenger took the ice cold water from the refrigerator and filled the trusty spray bottle. She knew she only had a few moments to act. She took her stance, steadied her weapon. "Stream" setting again. Squeezed the trigger. Her aim, perfected from practice on a certain basset hound, was true. As the icy water hit each hot lightbulb, the bulbs went out with a satisfying pop, and the Avenger returned to her hideout with time to spare

...

The city changed to automated trash collection in October, and like other households, our four individual thirty-gallon trash cans were replaced with one large wheeled monstrosity provided by the city. The rules were clearly stated. The attached lid on the new container must be closed when it was placed at the curb. No overloading. If you threw away too much, you paid a charge for excess trash.

With two adults using a can designed to hold the trash of a family of five, we had no problem staying within the limits. But from the first week of the new program, there was trouble. I put the trash out and went in-

side. Later, when I went out to place the recycling bin at the curb, I noticed that our trash can, like the Nabbits', was overflowing. When I lifted the lid, I discovered that the Nabbits had put several bags of their trash into our can.

I began to wait until Nola had left for work to put the trash out. Inconvenient, but effective. And it meant that I put the trash out every week instead of sharing the chore with my husband.

My husband bewildered me by siding with Nola on this issue. He thought my outrage was wholly unjustified.

"What if they're dumping something toxic into our trash can? Something illegal?" I asked.

"It's just trash," he said. Then, for good measure, added, "We'll never see that twenty-five dollars."

It was after he left for work that morning that my Suburban Avenger fantasies began. As the afternoon wore on, I was shocked at the avenues my own imagination took in the name of righteous anger. I wanted to plant my fist in Ricky's smiling face.

In the next moment I was ashamed of myself for thinking such a thing. Was this the result of watching Westerns as a kid? Too much violence on TV? Was I reading too many mysteries?

I calmed down. The Suburban

Avenger would be forced to stay in the realm of imagination. I needed to find a legal remedy. I went to the library and checked out a well-worn book on suing in small claims court, and began the process. I was finally becoming a true Californian. I was going to sue someone.

I realized that I had only *heard* the Nabbits' last name. Were there two *t*'s or one? Two *b*'s or one? I tried the phone directory. No Nola Nabbit listing.

The Suburban Avenger whispered in my ear.

I let my husband put the trash out.

After he left for work, but long before the garbage trucks arrived, I checked my trap. Sure enough, the trash can was bulging with added material. I felt nothing but smug satisfaction as I pulled a bag of Nabbit trash from the trash can, took it into my back yard, and set it on a table I used for gardening.

My excitement built as I rummaged—wearing old clothes and a pair of rubber gloves—through the Nabbit bag. Few things can tell our secrets as thoroughly as our trash does. The courts long ago ruled that once a person put his trash at a curb the expectation of privacy was gone. Trash is fair game. Even if Nola hadn't dumped the bag in my trash can, it would have been legal to search it. Still, I felt better

knowing that she had walked the bag over to my side of the street. She should keep *her* trash out of *my* trash can or be prepared to suffer the consequences.

It didn't take long to find an envelope addressed to Nola. It was marked "Please open immediately" and came from the electric company. It contained a past-due notice. I didn't want to slog through the beer bottles, coffee grounds, and cigarette butts that made up the next layer of the bag. I had what I needed. Feeling bad about not recycling the beer bottles, but knowing their presence in my recycling bin would be a dead giveaway, I hauled the Nabbit trashbag back out to the container at the curb.

I typed up the forms needed to begin the process of suing Nola and filed them down at the courthouse. She bellowed her outrage in her typical fashion when the papers were served.

In December, our case went to trial. She dressed like a hooker for court and made a wholly inarticulate case for her defense. When the judge failed to accept her theory that Ted should be responsible for the damage, she shook her fist at him and insulted his antecedents, which undoubtedly did not help her in the least.

Not surprised that she lost

the case, I was shocked when she actually paid the judgment. I cashed the check and presented the funds to my husband. "Twenty-five dollars, plus my court costs," I said. He wasn't nearly as pleased as I'd thought he'd be.

"Now we have to worry about their going to war with us," he said.

"Don't let the Nabbits turn us into rabbits!" I quoted.

For all my bravado at that moment I began to fear he was right. The next day Ricky sat on his porch staring toward our house with a blatantly hostile expression. I was afraid to leave the house, even for a few moments, worried that he might do some sort of damage while I was gone. My husband's predictions of war came to mind. I crossed the street to Sarah's house.

After she congratulated me on my victory in court, she agreed to keep an eye on my house while I took care of some errands. As I walked back to my driveway, I heard Ricky laughing mirthlessly behind me.

I finished my errands, then drove to a nearby department store. There I purchased various articles of dark clothing. Together they created an ensemble that roughly matched the one I had imagined the Suburban Avenger donning for her escapades.

As I pulled back into the driveway, Ricky came back out onto his porch to resume his stare-athon. I took the bags of clothing from my trunk and felt my confidence surge as I clutched them. I slammed the trunk and turned to return Ricky's stare. He went back into his house. Triumphant, I hid the clothing in the back of my closet. One never knew when a Suburban Avenger might be needed.

Ricky was arrested that same evening breaking into Sarah's house. He was going to be tried as an adult, and there was little doubt in anyone's mind that he would be convicted.

"Those two old prunes, they've been out to get my boy from the beginning!" Nola raged to other neighbors. She didn't find many sympathetic listeners, but her bad-mouthing was so nonstop, it began to grow irritating.

Not nearly as irritating, though, as her practice of turning on the light Ricky had mounted for baseball games. At two or three in the morning our bedroom would suddenly be flooded with light. When I tried to talk to her about it, she flipped me the bird and slammed her front door in my face.

The next day, on my front lawn, I found a pile of dog droppings so large it could have been collected from a kennel. The war, it seemed, was on. Think-

ing of her gesture at the door, I decided to buy a bottle of herbicide.

On the next trash day my husband put the trash out. From my kitchen window later I could see that the lid was propped open. I walked out to the curb and, sure enough, there were extra bags of trash in our container. Consumed by curiosity, and ready to prepare for a little payback, I surreptitiously pulled the two Nabbit bags out and took them to the back yard.

Donning my trash-searching outfit again, I began carefully removing items from one of the bags. Most of the garbage was food waste that could go directly into a new bag. That done, I studied what remained, paying more attention to the contents this time. I began to know Nola Nabbit.

She smoked Winston filtered cigarettes and whatever she rolled up into ZigZag cigarette papers. She drank a variety of budget beers and had polished off one bottle of cheap white table wine. She had been late on her mortgage payment this month. She drank a lot of coffee, and her family ate a lot of fast food. She had been to see a podiatrist and apparently hadn't paid him on time. She had been invited to a wedding. She had received a reminder card for

Daisy's next dental appointment.

She had thrown away a pair of medium black stockings with a run in them and replaced them with another pair of the same expensive brand. Apparently a good pair of stockings was important to her. Objectively, I had to admit that Nola had nice legs. She knew it, too.

She had written notes while on the phone, mostly first names, but on one sheet a misspelled reminder: "Pay \$30 by the 10th to Ricky's psychologist."

A list stained with coffee grounds caught my eye. I could still make out its title: "Ruls of the House." Beneath that,

1. Chors must be dun befor you play ball.
2. No going out at nite w/out teling me were you are going and who.
3. Crewfew is at ten.
4. *No lies.*

Braking of ruls will be delt with.

I stared at the list for some time, thinking of all the parents whose children become impossible strangers. Even Nola, poor example that she might be, had struggled with this problem.

My curiosity was stronger than my sympathy. I opened the

second bag. It was from Daisy's room. Here was scratch paper with seventh grade math problems on it and several false starts on a report on California Indians. There were notes from a Bible study class on Corinthians. (In her neat printing: "Now comes a time to put away childish things . . .") Tucked inside some of the wadded up sheets of notebook paper were foil candy wrappers. I pictured a terrified Daisy sneaking chocolates from a hidden candy-sale canister, finding some solace in forbidden sweetness.

At the bottom of the bag was a letter:

*Dear Cathy,
Sorry we can't come to the wedding. There is big trouble with Ricky. Mom took money he had been saving and paid for a window he broke. It made him mad, and you know Ricky. He robbed our neighbor. He's done it before but this time I think he*

will be in jail a long time. I know what he did was wrong, but I will miss him so much. He makes me laugh.

I guess I shouldn't be writing sad news to someone who is getting married.

The letter stopped there, and I imagined her suiting action to word, discarding this letter and writing a happier one. Living in that household, what could she possibly write?

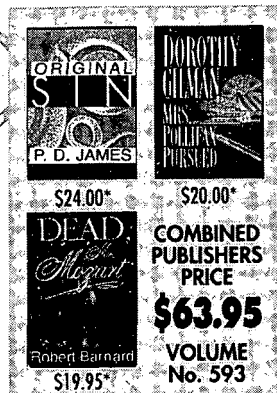
I sat there in the winter sun, staring at the letter for a long time.

I gathered the Nabbits' trash together and put it in a new bag. I took the bag out to the curb and shoved it down into our container. After that day my husband always took the trash out. I made room for whatever the Nabbits brought our way.

The Suburban Avenger was laid to rest. I put away childish things.

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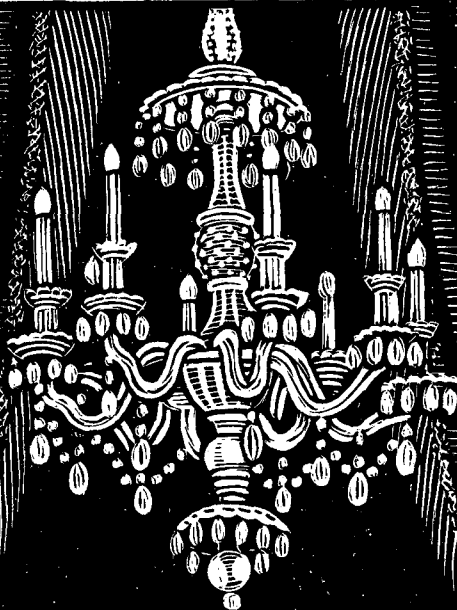
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The Search for O. Volt

Jeff Hazard

KRO

My friend Bill loves to tell stories. Sometimes, though, he omits a detail or is a little vague on some point, and then I have to interrupt him to ask questions so I can follow his story. Usually he doesn't object, but often in the thick of the plot, if he thinks I'm asking too many questions, he gets a little testy.

Here, then, is his latest story about how he almost trapped both of us in Russia.



BILL: It's snowing in Moscow.

ME: I knew it would be.

BILL: Two men are huddled in the corner of a room.

ME: Is it a cold vast cavern of a room?

BILL: Of course it is. Not only that, it's a secret room—so secret that neither of the men knows where he is.

ME: But why are they huddled in one corner of the room?

BILL: If you didn't interrupt so much, you'd already know that they're trying to stay as far away from that chandelier as they can get.

ME: Chandelier?

BILL: A magnificent crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room. No—before you ask—it's not lit. No electric power is flowing anywhere in this vast, secret building—the Commissar of Electricity has seen to that—nor will any flow until his daughter Natasha has been freed from Lubyanka Prison.

ME: What did Natasha do?

BILL: Don't ask. Never mind. Look at the two men in the corner. They're whispering now.

ME: Why are they whispering? What are they whispering about?

BILL: One of them whispers, "What you ask, my dear Terribilov, is preposterous! How can I send an agent to a place that is not on a map?" To which Ivan Terribilov (*sotto voce*) replies, "Nothing is impossible, Boris Stepanovsky. If the GRU can find the secret city of Nyetgrad after the Kremlin hid it seven times, certainly you, as a major general in the KGB, can find this—this place called Celerina."

But Boris is adamant. "If it is not on any map, it cannot be found!" he hisses.

Well, this is too much for Ivan Terribilov. Completely forgetting the chandelier, he bellows, "Then, by Beria, get a map that Celerina is on!"

Now, Ivan Terribilov is a colonel general, but Boris Stepanovsky is only a major general, so of course he has to salute his superior officer as they both storm off in embarrassed silence.

ME: Embarrassed silence?

BILL: Of course. You see they are both scared to death that they have spilled the beans because, in the silence that follows, they hear the chandelier tinkling with delight—tinkling with such delight it

almost seems to light up, but obviously it can't do that. No, it can't do that, but they are afraid of what its tinkling means.

ME: What *does* it mean?

BILL: They're afraid it means that their archrival, the hated GRU, now knows—

ME: The gee are you? What's that?

BILL: It's another secret intelligence agency like the KGB.

ME: Two rival intelligence agencies?

BILL: That's the way the Kremlin wants it. They figure that the competition between the two agencies will promote better intelligence gathering.

ME: That makes sense.

BILL: You'd think so, yes, but—well, where was I?

ME: You were saying that the two guys, Ivan and Boris, are afraid that the GRU knows something.

BILL: Yes, that's right. They're afraid that the GRU now knows that they're looking for Celerina, and they know that if that's true the GRU is also going to start looking for Celerina, even though they don't know why Ivan and Boris of the KGB are looking for it.

Their fears are well-founded, for there, sitting in his brand-new secret headquarters, is General Dimitri Gobulov of the GRU, and he is smiling.

ME: Smiling?

BILL: Of course he's smiling. You'd be smiling, too, if you had just received intelligence of what your archenemy was trying to do.

ME: I would?

BILL: Of course you would, especially if you were head honcho of the GRU and had this nice new secret headquarters hidden away fifty meters below the crypt of St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square.

As a matter of fact, General Gobulov should have been laughing—yes, laughing because at last he has seen his dream come true—laughing with glee now that the gold-striped domes of St. Basil's Cathedral (thanks to his perseverance) are now concealing the world's most sophisticated radio and radar antennae. Yes, and he should have been laughing because of the mole he has so successfully weasled into KGB headquarters. What a splendid job Comrade X7 has done bugging that chandelier! Already Dimitri has gotten its message—yet another triumph.

But in spite of all this good news, the general was not laughing, and his smile soon became a frown as he began to wonder why that old goat Terribilov at the KGB wanted to find a place that wasn't

even on a map. What was the name of that place? Was it Celerina? Celerina—yes, that was it. Well, there was only one thing to do: he'd not only find Celerina before Terribilov did, but he'd find out why Terribilov wanted to find it in the first place.

General Dimitri Gobulov pressed a secret button to summon his aide.

ME: Aha! The plot thickens.

BILL: Yes indeed. Now perhaps you remember that General Ivan Terribilov of the KGB mentioned that the GRU had found the secret city of Nyetgrad even though the Kremlin had moved it seven times.

ME: Yes, but how did they do it? I mean, they couldn't move the whole city—or could they?

BILL: Of course they didn't move the city itself—they just slid the grid.

ME: Slid the grid?

BILL: You're bewildered? Of course you are—you're supposed to be. You see, the secret city of Nyetgrad is underground at map coordinates A5, seven kilometers northeast of Semipalatinsk, but don't tell anyone I told you so. Now, if you were trying to find Nyetgrad, naturally you'd go to the map index and there's Nyetgrad, listed at A5, but what do you find at A5? Only the Kremlin could tell you, but they won't. It might be Minsk or Pinsk, or Tomsk, but it will not be Nyetgrad. How do they do it? Well, the grid is overlaid on the map, you see, and they just slide it around at the Kremlin to suit their fancy, north, south, east, or west. It's completely bewildering, and that's the way they want it.

ME: Very ingenious, but why do they want to hide Nyetgrad anyway?

BILL: Well, don't tell anyone I told you, but among other secret projects I've heard they're developing a five-engined electric bomber called Elektroflot. More interesting to us is the Ministry of Foreign Publications where the sharp eyes of one Orlo Kravitz, a specialist in the scrutiny of foreign technical documents, has spotted something that rocketed him off to his commissar, who—

ME: But wait a minute! Why is this Orlo scrutinizing foreign technical documents in a secret city?

BILL: What better place to hide a hundred scrutineers searching for inventions to steal from foreign countries for the protection and advancement of Mother Russia?

ME: A hundred people just searching foreign technical publica-

tions for inventions to steal? That's incredible! Well, what did Orlo find?

BILL: In the back of a small Swiss publication, at the bottom of the last page, Orlo found an article entitled "Transmission of Electrical Energy Through Air and Space." It was signed "O. Volt, Celerina, 2/XI/90."

ME: And what did O. Volt have to say in his article? It must have been pretty important.

BILL: Orlo's boss, Commissar Valery Yurchov, thought it was so important that he faxed it straight off to the Kremlin, where it sat and sat until finally it somehow appeared in General Terribilov's secret in basket. You know what happened after that.

ME: General Terribilov told General Stepanovsky to find Celerina, but Stepanovsky said he couldn't find a place that wasn't on a map. Right?

BILL: You've got it, and of course Dimitri Gobulov, down in his new secret GRU headquarters, hears the whole conversation via the bugged chandelier and decides he will beat that old goat Ivan Terribilov by finding Celerina first, so he presses the button to call for his aide, Lieutenant Oleg Solov, but nothing happens.

ME: Nothing happens?

BILL: Nothing, because you see Lieutenant Solov was still in the secret new officers' mess finishing his lunch of black bean soup and a caviar and lettuce sandwich washed down with half a liter of Rakkanninov vodka and could not hear the buzzer, and even if he had, he was unfit to respond to it, what with the vodka burning a hole in his throat and swirling up through his brain. Still, duty was duty, and finally he staggered back to his desk to weather the storm he expected from his boss, the general. But there was no storm.

ME: No storm? And this is Russia? You mean to tell me the guy wasn't even court-martialed for being AWOL when his superior officer summoned him?

BILL: Oh no. You see the general needs the lieutenant to help him find Celerina. He may give him a tongue-lashing later, but right now he's all honey and spice.

"Now then, lieutenant," he says, "since you are the only one in the GRU clever enough to have found the secret city of Nyetgrad, even after the Kremlin moved it seven times, I am hereby ordering you to return there and go to the Commissar of Foreign Publications and demand all information on this place called Celerina. Speed is essential."

"Understood, comrade general," replies Oleg, trying desperately to salute.

"Oh, by the way, my dear Solov," the general asks, "can you tell me if that new Rakmanninov vodka they are serving at our new mess is as good as the old stuff?"

"Indeed it is, comrade general. Better, in fact."

"I thought so. The door is one meter to your right, and it is closed. Dismissed."

ME: You mean to tell me that the general is sending his aide, who is so drunk he can't find the door, he's sending him off on a mission of vital importance?

BILL: This is Russia, don't forget.

ME: You mean it happens here all the time? And in spite of his condition, I suppose you're going to tell me next that Lieutenant Solov finds the secret city of Nyetgrad again.

BILL: Of course he finds it. Not only does he find it, he returns to the general the next day and hands him the original copy of the publication in which O. Volt's article appeared.

The general is delighted. "Excellent, my dear Solov," he says. "But tell me how you managed to persuade those vultures at the Ministry of Foreign Publications to give you this copy."

"I have discovered, comrade general, that my Granov .38, fitted with silencer, even unloaded, removes almost any obstacle," the lieutenant replies.

"Well, well," the general chuckles, "that is a most unconventional approach, but quite acceptable if it works."

General Gobulov opens the publication, and glancing through it, he says, "You have read the article, I presume?"

"Yes, comrade general."

"Kindly summarize the uses to which Volt's invention could be put."

"Certainly, comrade general. In my estimation, the invention described in the article has great potential, not only to destroy Imperialist incoming missiles, but as a terror weapon with which to control those who might contemplate the destruction of our Motherland from within."

"Well then," General Gobulov replies, "if your estimate is correct, we now know why General Terribilov at the KGB is so eager to find Celerina. If he ever does find it, from what the chandelier told us, he will certainly send an agent there to steal Volt's invention before

we can. It would be a victory we cannot let the KGB win. That is why speed is essential.

"But we are in luck. Here, on the very first page of the publication, is the address and even the telephone number of the publisher in Geneva, Switzerland. Telephone the publication there immediately, and procure the address and telephone number of the man Volt. Then phone him, determining precisely where this Celerina is, and tell him we are interested in his invention and would like to see a demonstration of it as soon as possible."

"And if they ask who is calling, comrade general, what shall I say?"

"Hmm—that is a difficulty."

"Shall I say that I am an Englishm—"

"An Englishman—yes. Excellent. Your English is very good, is it not? Were you not the only student at the Institute who could translate the 'Jabberwocky' into Russian?"

"Yes, comrade general."

"Very well, then. You will be Sir Charles Lewis of Lewis Electronics, PLC, in Cheltenham—yes, Cheltenham, from where the English are always trying to spy on us here. Now, if you have no questions, dismissed."

But the lieutenant has a surprise waiting for him when he returns to his desk and picks up his phone.

ME: It isn't dead, is it?

BILL: Deader than a doornail.

ME: Who did it?

BILL: X7. Who else?

ME: But I thought X7 was working with the GRU. You said that General Gobulov had weaseled him into the KGB.

BILL: Yes, but he was also a double agent. He knew both agencies needed and, foolishly, trusted him, so he played one side against the other. First, as you know, he bugged the chandelier at the KGB so the GRU could hear what Boris and Ivan said, and just now he wired Lieutenant Solov's phone so that it is an open microphone relaying everything the lieutenant and the general have just discussed straight back to the KGB.

ME: So now both sides know what the other is doing.

BILL: Yes, but it looks as if the KGB is ahead, because General Terribilov, in a brilliant maneuver, decides to do just what General Gobulov had planned to do.

ME: He's going to telephone O. Volt, using the same subterfuge?

And he knows that Gobulov can't use his phone at all, so General Terribilov at KGB is ahead.

BILL: But you're forgetting one thing.

ME: What's that?

BILL: The gold-striped domes of St. Basil's Cathedral. Remember, they're concealing the most sophisticated radar and radio antennae, and by quickly throwing a series of switches and deftly aligning the antennae, General Gobulov and the lieutenant overhear and record the following static-filled conversation between General Stepanov-sky of the KGB and O. Volt in Celerina:

"Hello, Mr. Volt? SKIZZOW Mr. Volt, I say, are you there? This is Mr. ZIROOOOKard Weems of Preston Electronics in Cheltenham, GAARTZITZI have read your article on the transmission of electrical HUUUUUMMM through air and space. We would very much like to see a demonZAKtion at your convenience. . . . SPAK ZIKRIKKOKOOW! Would you repeat that, please, Mr. Volt? . . . SSS SSSSSSSsty-four December at fifteen hundred hours? Good. Now would you pleaseSKAAAKme how to get to Celerina, Mr. Volt?

" . . . DIT DIT DIT DAH DAH DAH DIT DIT DIT train from Bergun to DIT DIT DIT DAHwe seem to have some interference here, Mr. Volt. Take the train from Bergun to Naz through the Preda tunnel SKORK DIT SKAKolt are you there, Mr. VoSKE?EEK-CLICK."

ME: Obviously he hung up. There certainly was a lot of static on that line. You did that very well, Bill.

BILL: My blushes, Watson.

ME: But in spite of it all, neither Gobulov at the GRU nor Terribilov at the KGB has yet found Celerina.

BILL: They did get some hints, though, because Volt told them to take the train from Bergun, past Naz, through the Preda tunnel.

ME: But wasn't he making up those names?

BILL: Of course he wasn't. He wants to demonstrate his invention. He wants them to find Celerina.

ME: Are you trying to tell me there really is a place called Celerina?

BILL: Honest Injun, and Volt was right. If you got on the train at Bergun, you'd pass Naz, and you'd find the train rumbling through the Preda tunnel. You'd be hard-pressed to find Naz, though. It's only three cowsheds on an avalanche slope. Celerina is a metropolis by comparison.

ME: Can't you tell me where Celerina is? I won't tell anyone.

BILL: It's in the Engadine Valley, not far from St. Moritz.

ME: Swiss ski country, right?

BILL: Some of the best.

ME: But of course neither Gobulov nor Terribilov knows that, do they?

BILL: Heck, they don't even know that Celerina is in Switzerland.

ME: It's ridiculous: here are these two secret agents in one of the world's greatest superpowers beating each other's brains out just to find a village so tiny it is not on many maps, looking for a man there who claims he can shoot electricity through air and space. Who is this nut O. Volt? Can he really do what he claims?

BILL: I'm glad you asked that question. Come now to Celerina and you can judge for yourself who he is and what he can do. Herr Otto Volt has a visitor in his tiny garage, and we are just in time to hear his visitor, an Englishman, Sir Cyril Stokes, giving Herr Volt some advice.

"Herr Volt," says Sir Cyril, "you have just now very ably demonstrated how the dynamo driven by this Volkswagen motor generates an electrical current and projects it through three meters of space where it shortcircuits the ignition system of a second Volkswagen engine, causing the latter to stall. In essence, you have created a minuscule thunderbolt without the thunder. With this invention you have demonstrated one of many applications of electromagnetic pulse, or EMP. However," Sir Cyril continues, "as an electrical engineer I can tell you that you will have to square the output of the dynamo to increase the range by one meter. A VW motor develops a scant forty horsepower, so you will need at least sixteen hundred horsepower to increase the range of your invention by only one meter."

ME: Bad news for Otto Volt. What does he do about it?

BILL: He looks pretty glum. Obviously, he realizes he hasn't done his homework. Still, he protests, "But, Sir Cyril, from the *Journal of Electricity* article which I just wrote, already from Cheltenham in England I have only yesterday received a call asking me to demonstrate my invention on twenty-four December at fifteen hundred hours."

"You received a call from Cheltenham? What was the man's name, Herr Volt?"

"There was much static, but I think the man said his name was Weems—of Preston Electronics, he said."

Well, Sir Cyril suddenly gets very serious. He doesn't say anything for a minute, but then, very softly, he says:

"Herr Volt, I have been coming here to Celerina to ski every Christmas holiday for what—ten years? I have seen you wrestling with your invention, and I knew it would never work because many people—myself included—have tried to do the very same thing. Still, I didn't think it any of my affair to discourage your efforts. Today you asked my advice, and I gave it to you. I don't know whether you were discouraged by it or not, but because of what you have just told me, I will give you more advice, and I sincerely hope you will follow it because I fear that if you don't, you may find yourself in a life-threatening situation."

ME: What is he talking about, anyway?

BILL: Holy smoke, can't you guess?

ME: No.

BILL: He's warning him.

ME: Warning him?

BILL: Yes, warning him. Now, for Pete's sake, shut up while I get my bearings again. Where was I? Oh yeah—so, of course Volt is all upset and asks Sir Cyril what he means. Sir Cyril puts a hand on Otto's shoulder and says, "My dear chap, I have lived in Cheltenham all my life, and there is nobody by the name of Weems living there. The Weems family lives in Basingstoke. Furthermore, there is no company called Preston Electronics, either in Cheltenham or in all the British Isles. Someone is making a false representation and is undoubtedly planning to steal your invention. If you resist, there is no telling what they may do to you, so my advice to you is to be extremely careful. Bluntly put, your life is more valuable than your invention, even if it proves to be a success."

Well, of course Otto is thunderstruck and downcast to boot, and seeing this, Sir Cyril adds, "I will do all in my power to help you, believe me, my dear fellow. I am quite certain I know the perpetrators of this scandalous scheme; I have been fighting them for years. Fortunately I will still be here on December twenty-fourth and would like to meet whoever comes to visit you."

But the twenty-fourth of December comes and goes, and no stranger visits Herr Volt.

ME: So, even though he said he would, General Terribilov never sent an agent?

BILL: Of course not. Neither Gobulov of the GRU nor Terribilov of the KGB had found Celerina, and of course they both had to find it

before they could find Volt. But on December twenty-third General Terribilov was not worrying about where Celerina was—he was already preparing an agent to send there, no matter where it was.

ME: He was getting an agent ready to go to Celerina even though he didn't know where Celerina was?

BILL: You obviously don't understand KGB logic. They'd know where Celerina was when they got there.

ME: I see. That way they'd never get lost.

BILL: Exactly. But you've got to hand it to General Terribilov—he's thorough.

From his secret agent in Cheltenham (a Russian masquerading as Major Humphrey Fotheringay), General Terribilov learns some interesting facts about Sir Cyril Stokes. Major Fotheringay informs the KGB, via a secret coded fax message, that Sir Cyril weighs one hundred and eighty-five pounds in his socks and shorts, is five feet eight inches tall, spends his Christmas vacations somewhere outside the British Isles, and is captain of the CCC. The major even includes a fuzzy photo of four men standing in a row. They are all wearing striped shorts and top hats, holding wooden mallets, and smiling happily. An arrow points to a man who, the major explains in a note, is Sir Cyril Stokes circa 1955. The major adds that he is investigating the CCC but that the significance of the wooden mallets is unknown at this time.

Well, when Colonel General Ivan Terribilov receives this information, he is delighted. He—

ME: But what is the mysterious CCC?

BILL: The Cheltenham Croquet Club—what else?

ME: And that, of course, explains the wooden mallets.

BILL: Of course.

ME: But why is General Terribilov so delighted?

BILL: I was about to tell you that before I was so rudely interrupted. Colonel General Ivan Terribilov summons his inferior assistant, Major General Boris Stepanovsky. Then, referring frequently to papers on his desk, General Terribilov says, "At ease, comrade general. I have here your most recent service record report, and I am compelled to inform you that were I not a lenient man I would turn you over to the Politburo."

ME: To the Politburo?

BILL: That's right. That's what starts Boris trembling in his boots. "B-But, comrade general, what have I done to deserve even the thought that if you were not lenient you would do that?" he falters.

"You do not yourself know? You cannot imagine?" asks Terribilov.

"No, I cannot imagine, comrade general."

"You do not remember—" Terribilov shuffles the papers in the dossier—"you do not remember how, due to your laxity, a German lad barely in his teens was permitted not only to fly through all the Soviet Air and Rocket Forces Defense Command, but even to land his flimsy American plane right in the heart of our Motherland, in Red Square? You cannot remember that?"

"B-But, com-com—"

"Enough!" roars Terribilov. He glares at Stepanovsky for a minute. "Very well, we will pass over that bit of laxity for the moment." He shuffles through the papers. "Let us see if you recall the incident of 1 May '89, when in Red Square at seventeen hundred hours thirty-five minutes, in front of a large crowd, you disseminated false disinformation about the secret Pushkin Project. Now, what have you to say about that?"

ME: Bill, would you please tell me what false disinformation is?

BILL: That's just what Boris asked. "F-False disinformation, comrade general? With due respect, comrade general, I merely spoke the truth."

At which remark Ivan chuckles. "Of course, my dear Stepanovsky," he replies, "and so out the window fly ten years of all our secret plans, straight into Dimitri Gobulov's lap at the GRU. Yet of course you cannot remember either one of those examples of your laxity. Well, well, perhaps I should reconsider my first recommendation. Perhaps, instead of reporting you to the Politburo, perhaps a visit to the Oblitzki Hospital would help you. I've been told they have remarkable cures for those of us whose memories have failed."

ME: The Oblitzki Hospital?

BILL: A mental hospital. They admit sane people who are out of favor with the government, drive them insane, and then ship them off to Siberia. Well, by this time the wretched Boris is just a blob of nerveless jelly. His knees shake so violently that he can barely stand up, and his lips tremble so badly that he is nearly speechless.

"Sit down, comrade general," says Ivan. "As has often been said of me, I am perhaps too lenient with those under my command. I can see that you are contrite, that, even though you did make those mistakes, the fact that you do not remember them does not disqualify you for the assignment I have in mind for you."

After Ivan's tirade, Boris can hardly believe his good fortune. "An assignment, comrade general?" he asks hopefully.

But Ivan is silent as he thumbs through the dossier before him.

"You have put on some weight, comrade general," he remarks at last. "Two point five kilograms, to be exact."

"Y-Yes, I am afraid so, comrade general."

"It is all to the good, but although you had a ten millimeter haircut at fifteen hundred hours twenty-one minutes only three days ago, twenty December, you will be given a closer one of two millimeters tomorrow morning at oh five hundred. You will then—"

"A haircut at oh five hundred in the morn—but that is preposterous, comrade general!"

"Consider yourself lucky, Major General Stepanovsky. You have three choices—the Politburo, Oblitzki Hospital, or a haircut. Which is it to be?"

ME: He doesn't have any choices at all, of course. But what is all this stuff about a haircut?

BILL: You'll just have to wait and see. But as you said, poor old Stepanovsky doesn't really have three choices at all—he has none. He settles on the haircut. Ivan continues outlining Boris's schedule.

"At oh five hundred ten minutes, the mold will be ready for fitting, and at oh five hundred thirty minutes, it will start to dry until oh six hundred. During that—"

ME: What is he doing, Bill?

BILL: Just shut up, will you? You'll know in a minute. "During that time," General Terribilov continues, "you will receive the necessary clothing, including ski equipment, a Granov .38 pistol with silencer, and secret sealed instructions for your mission. You will not, under any condition, read them until you are in flight to your destination. Is that clear?" Boris just nods his head.

ME: So Ivan is sending Boris to Celerina even though neither one of them knows where it is?

BILL: Right.

ME: But why the haircut? And what's the mold for?

BILL: General Terribilov's plan is really very simple and clever. He is sending General Stepanovsky, disguised as Sir Cyril Stokes, to Celerina to steal Herr Volt's invention and bring it back to Russia.

ME: But how is he going to disguise General Stepanovsky as Sir Cyril? How does he know what Sir Cyril looks like?

BILL: He has the picture of Sir Cyril with his pals of the Cheltenham Croquet Club, and he's had a rubber mold of Sir Cyril's face made, using the photo as a guide. This mask, he plans, will cover the whole of Boris's face and part of his head, hence the haircut, you see.

ME: That's very clever, but even if Terribilov knew where Celerina was, how did he plan to get Boris there?

BILL: Funny that you should ask because that is just what Boris asks Ivan, and Ivan tells Boris that he will find out when he opens the secret instructions after he gets on the plane. He then abruptly dismisses him.

ME: You know, Bill, it seems to me that General Terribilov could find an easier way to eliminate his rival, General Stepanovsky.

BILL: No, it suits Ivan Terribilov's convoluted mindset. But Stepanovsky is no fool, and before you can say Oblitzki, he has phoned a friend in the Kremlin, and an hour later two white-gowned attendants carry the ranting General Terribilov out of his office and into a waiting ambulance.

ME: And that, I suppose, is the last we shall hear of Colonel General Ivan Terribilov?

BILL: Right.

ME: And that, dear reader, is why Otto Volt had no strangers visiting him before Christmas. But what about that smart Lieutenant Solov and General Gobulov at the GRU?

BILL: Well, as soon as they heard about General Terribilov, they forgot about the search for Otto Volt.

ME: But why did they give it up? Didn't they want Volt's invention after all?

BILL: Not after they discovered it didn't work.

ME: Who told them that?

BILL: Sir Cyril, through X7.

ME: You mean—

BILL: You see, Sir Cyril is a British agent whose contact in Moscow is X7, and as of course you know, X7 bugged both the KGB and the GRU. The idea was that then both agencies would be spending so much time eavesdropping on each other that they wouldn't have time for anything else. Well, of course it didn't work out quite that way, but—

ME: You mean X7 is English, in Moscow, feeding information back to England—to Sir Cyril?

BILL: You've got it, and of course when Sir Cyril goes to Celerina every Christmas, he meets X7 and they exchange information. That's when he told X7 to spread the word that O. Volt's invention wouldn't work. But now, if you'll just come with me over here in this corner, away from that chandelier, I'll tell you something.

ME: You're going to whisper something to me?

BILL: Yes. Herr Volt's invention really did work, and he sold it to the Swiss army.

ME: *Hooray!*

BILL: *Shh!* Now look what you've done! That chandelier just lit up.

ME: Omigosh!

BILL: Not to worry. You didn't do that. The Commissar of Electricity did it now that his daughter Natasha has been released from Lubyanka Prison.

ME: Who cares? Get us out of here, Bill.

BILL: What's your hurry? Don't you want to meet the charming Natasha?

ME: No. I want out of this mausoleum.

BILL: Too cold and cavernous all of a sudden?

ME: Look, Bill—you got us in here. Now get us out. Or are you stalling because you don't know how to get us out? You've got no right to be telling me a story that gets me into this awful place if you can't get me out.

BILL: Well, I'm in it, too, don't forget. Do you think I like being stuck in this hole any more than—hey, who's this big guy with a bearskin cap and boots coming this way? Maybe he can help get us out of here. Good thing I speak Russian. I'll ask him: "Oy, comrade! Way outski?"

He comes over to us, looking around, and whispers, "Lost, are ye, chaps? Foller me." He leads us up thirteen staircases, down twenty more, and through five empty halls, and after crawling through three damp tunnels, each with three branches, we climb up a steel ladder and emerge through a manhole in Red Square. I thank our friend. He says, "Piece of kyke! Cheerio, chaps!" Then he's gone.

ME: Who was that helpful gent?

BILL: X7.

ME: Why couldn't *you* get us out of there? Why did you have to get X7 to do it for you? What kind of a storyteller are you, anyway?

BILL: Well, I guess that's for you to decide.

On the whole, even after that close squeak, I still say Bill is a good storyteller. True, he himself couldn't get us out of there, but at least he got one of his characters to do it for us. You can't ask a storyteller to do more than that.

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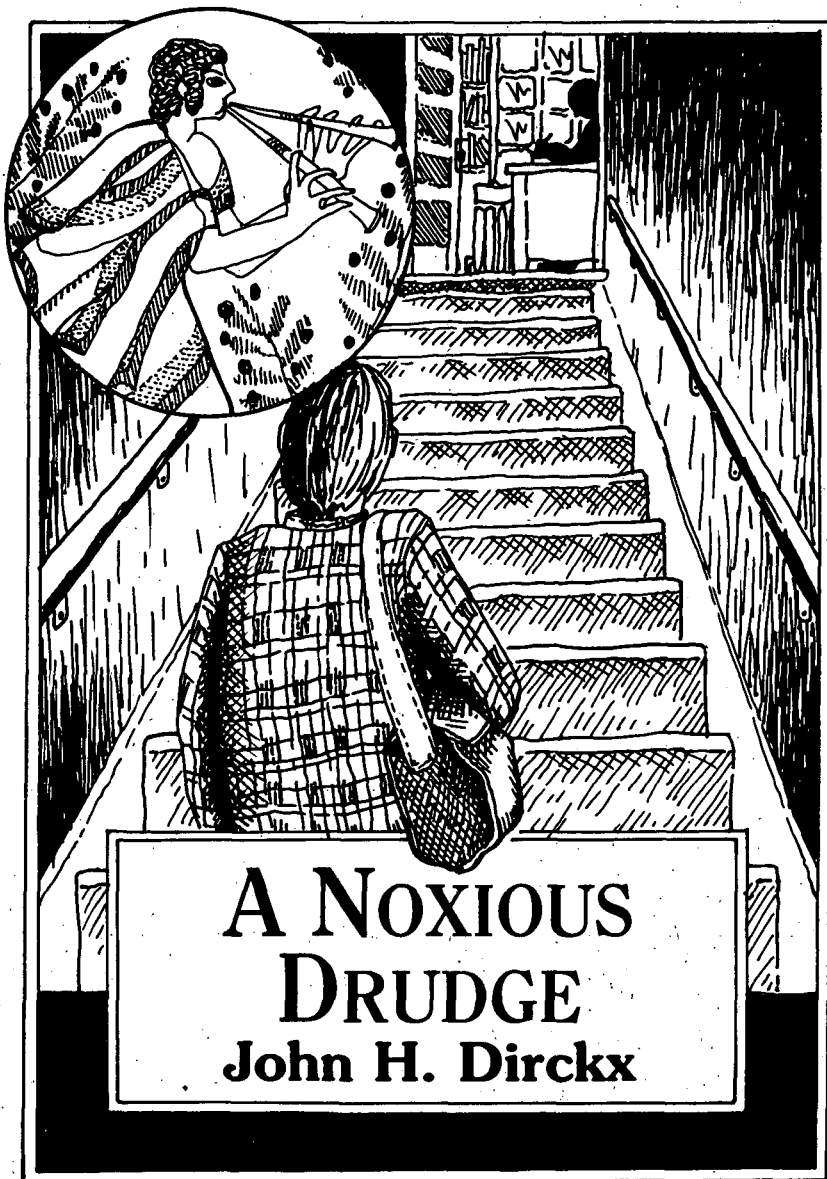
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FICTION



A NOXIOUS DRUDGE

John H. Dirckx

Illustration by Laurie Davis

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/96

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Even at noontime the stairway at the north end of Revere Hall lay in deep shadow. Kevin Barrone, seven minutes late for his appointment, loped up the dusty steps, breathing easily despite the heavy bag of books that swung from one shoulder. His sweat-pants had been washed too many times, but not too recently.

The door to Professor Kuhlwein's office stood open. Kevin walked in and found himself in a long, narrow, chilly room, shabbily furnished with a motley assortment of desks and worktables and cluttered with books, file folders, file cards, and loose papers.

The professor looked up from a stack of papers on which he had been inscribing acid comments in red ink and eyed Kevin with distaste. "Barrone, K.?" he said, not cordially. "Don't sit down, you won't be here long."

He spun around on his swivel chair, picked up a gradebook from the table behind him, and spun back to face Kevin. "You have a good solid F going into the midterm. Planning to do anything about it?"

Kevin unslung his shoulder bag and let it slide noisily down his body to the floor. "I think I'd better drop Latin."

Professor Kuhlwein's scowl deepened, and a light of sadistic

glee sprang up in his eyes. "A bit late for that, isn't it? September twenty-seventh was the last day to drop or add. This is the middle of October. In case you hadn't noticed."

Kevin fidgeted. "It's just that I'm a psych major. I don't really need Latin. I only signed up for it because I had two years of it in high school and—"

"And you thought it would be an easy C for twelve credit hours." The professor hunched forward menacingly in his seat. "Now you listen to me, young man," he ranted with all the seasoned wisdom and maturity of thirty-two, "the academic world is full of phonies who pretend to know Latin and don't. Students who enroll in my Latin course either know how to read and write the language at the end of two years or they fail the course. I told you that the first day of class."

Kevin took a deep breath. "The trouble is, I can't keep up unless I cut back on my study time in my other courses. If I flunk Latin, it'll wreck my grade point average, and—" he set his chin doggedly "—knowing Latin is completely useless out there in the real world."

"That argument, I assure you, is wholly irrelevant to the present discussion," observed Professor Kuhlwein with icy calm.

"So," fumed Kevin, his frustra-

tion giving way to anger, "it boils down to some kind of a stupid tug of war between you and I."

"I think you mean 'between you and me.' By the way, that's a blunder that no one who has mastered Latin could possibly make."

Kevin snatched up his bag and flung out of the office without another word, nearly knocking over Professor Hering, who was just coming in.

"That wasn't the president of your fan club, was it, Kuhlwein?" asked Hering.

Kuhlwein snorted a negative, already immersed again in his work.

"Didn't think so. There was murder in his eye. Better look out—he's bigger than you are." Hering put his briefcase on a small desk in the corner, sat down before it, and took a stack of mail from a tray. "Happy to see you're getting along without my desk this week."

Kuhlwein threw down his red pen in disgust and went to the tall, narrow window, hemmed in on both sides by bookcases. "Only because I've got the overflow stashed here on the windowsill. Doing this dictionary project without a computer is like trying to cook soup in a sieve."

Hering was busy with his mail. "Samuel Johnson did it. Noah Webster did it."

"Oh, sure! English. And with a roomful of clerks, and a roomful of—room. Look at this mess." He turned and waved at the stacks of paper slips straggling in irregular rows along the table opposite his desk and along nearly every other horizontal surface in the room.

"Well, cheer up. You can borrow the top of my desk again for the rest of the week. I'm leaving for Boston in an hour, and I won't be back till Monday."

Kuhlwein wandered back to his desk. "Another guest gig?"

"Graduate seminar on Assyrian antiquities, tomorrow morning at Halliwell Academy of Design." He threw most of his mail into the wastebasket, locked the rest of it in his desk, and picked up his briefcase. "Speaking of which—have you looked at that draft proposal yet?"

Kuhlwein was slashing his way through assignment papers again with his red pen. "Are you kidding? I wish all I had to do was run graduate seminars and apply for grants to travel around taking pictures of statues."

"So you did look at it?"

"I fell asleep halfway through page one. I'll make a deal with you, Hering. If you persuade Mother Mount to find me a computer, I'll send your application to Washington by airmail and buy the stamps myself."

Hering, smiling sourly to himself, was already out the door. "See you Monday," he called over his shoulder.

At one o'clock Professor Kuhlwein dragged fourteen sophomore Latin students, kicking and screaming all the way, through two and one-half pages of Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods*. Afterwards he ate a solitary lunch in the faculty dining room in the basement of Pond Auditorium and then returned to his office with another stack of assignments to correct.

Instead of correcting them, however, he shut the door and devoted his full attention to his project of compiling a definitive lexicon of the Etruscan language—perforce without electronic assistance.

The gloom hung thick in the room when a metallic rapping at the door interrupted Kuhlwein's train of thought. A female voice called from the landing, "Are you in there, John?"

"Of course I'm in here," he shouted back irritably. He laid aside a slip of paper with meticulous care, went to the door and threw it open, and turned back to his desk without greeting his visitor. "Where else would I be but in the old broom closet, slaving away in total discomfort?"

Edith Mount, professor and chairman of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology,

stood blinking in the doorway. "Why don't you put on the lights?" she asked. "It's after five."

"They are on."

She came into the room, seemingly using her aluminum cane more as a staff of office than for support. "I got your note."

"I didn't think this was a social call. Nobody would risk pneumonia, eye strain, and claustrophobia just to—"

"Oh, stop whining, John." She turned Professor Hering's desk chair around and lowered her small frame gingerly into it. "We've been over that thirty times. Office assignments go by tenure. You've been here a little over three years, so you get a broom closet. Stick around—maybe next year a coat closet."

"Sounds warmer, anyway." Kuhlwein scribbled a note on a slip, crossed out part of it, scribbled more.

"What's on your mind? How's the dictionary coming?"

"It isn't, and that's exactly what's on my mind." He abandoned his efforts to work while conversing and turned around to face her. "What are the prospects of my getting some help with it in the shape of a PC?"

"I told you a month ago you could have Loretta's old electronic typewriter. It's got an eight-line display and you can store—"

"Dr. Mount," he interrupted in much the same savage tone he had found so useful in intimidating Kevin Barrone. "I am not making extracts from *Alice in Wonderland*. I am preparing a dictionary of Etruscan, which as you know perfectly well is written in a modified Greek alphabet from right to left. For that I need a computer with character-generating capabilities, special operating software, and a laser printer."

She nodded patiently. "I agree that's the right way to do it. But this is your own project, John. We haven't got a Department of Etruscan, remember?"

"That's another thing I wanted to talk to you about." Kuhlwein stepped to the windowsill and picked up a sheaf of slips. "There are a couple of points here I think you might find particularly interesting . . ."

As nearly as she could estimate later, it was about seven forty the next morning when Monica Mallory, a sophomore who worked ten hours a week for Housekeeping, unlocked the office of Professors Hering and Kuhlwein on the second floor of Revere Hall. She had been busy in the office for two or three minutes before she noticed Professor Kuhlwein's body lying twisted and motionless between his desk and his worktable.

Even in the murky light, one look told her he was dead. Calmly she picked up the telephone on Professor Hering's desk near the door and dialed Campus Security.

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn arrived at Revere Hall from police headquarters downtown before nine o'clock that morning. It was an old building of grimy, weathered limestone with Gothic touches. A steady trickle of students came and went through the corridors and on the stairs. A few, aware that something unusual was going on, stood in a loose bunch watching the door of Professor Kuhlwein's office. Somewhere a lecturer was haranguing his class in much the same tone as a preacher at a tent revival.

Auburn posted Fritz Dollinger, the uniformed officer he usually worked with, outside in the hall and went into the office. Kestrel, the evidence technician, was already busy taking photographs, measuring distances with a steel tape, and building up a sketch of the scene on graph paper. An investigator from the coroner's office, a former homicide detective named Stamaty, was making his own sketch and notes.

Stamaty looked up from his work and did a doubletake at Auburn. "What's with the mustache?"

"Just letting it grow out a little more. Why?"

"You look like a Sicilian bandit."

"Watch the ethnic slurs," quipped Auburn, who was African-American.

The body lay on its left side, with arms and legs flailed and the head resting athwart the base of a swivel chair. Auburn squatted for a look. "Whoever did that has a couple of fat knuckles," he said.

"Let's roll him on his back and get a better look," said Kestrel.

The dead man was a sandy-haired, somewhat undersized specimen dressed in a business suit with an outmoded tie and, under his jacket, a cardigan sweater. His chin was grotesquely swollen and livid, the deep purple shading gradually into crimson over his cheeks and brow. A second zone of swelling and discoloration on his left temple extended forward beyond the hairline. This wound, which had bled slightly, had probably been made when he fell and struck the base of the swivel chair.

"Have we got a positive I.D.?"

"Kuhlwein, John, age thirty-two," said Stamaty. "This is his office."

"Was this door locked when they found him?"

"Cleaner had to use a key to get in. She's out there somewhere. But the door locks when-

ever it closes, so—" He left it unfinished, intent on the task of helping Kestrel get a frontal shot of the dead man's face. "Got some early rigor here. I think his jaw is fractured."

After a slow, thoughtful survey of the cramped office, Auburn left them to their work. He found Monica Mallory in the corridor with her supervisor, waiting to be questioned.

She was a chunky blonde with a button nose and a soupbowl haircut. He wrote her name, address, and phone number in the top left corner of a three by five inch file card and then put it away while he got her story. "Are you sure the door was locked?" he asked.

"Yes. I knocked and tried the knob before I put the key in. Sometimes people are already in their offices when we come in."

"Who has a key to the office besides you?"

"Professor Kuhlwein and Professor Hering both have keys to the office. I have a passkey to all the offices in the building. The electricians and maintenance people have passkeys, too. And Security."

Monica's supervisor, a middle-aged woman in a denim apron, stood by mute and wide-eyed, ostensibly giving moral support. Auburn gently led Monica a little way along the hall, signaling

the supervisor with a glance to stay put.

"How well did you know Professor Kuhlwein?"

"Not very well. Hardly at all. I never had him for a class. I'm a marketing major."

"Ever go out with him?"

"No." She said it with a decisive twitch of the head that might have indicated mild indignation.

"Ever stop in the office and talk to him?"

"Sometimes he was in there when I was emptying the wastebaskets and dusting, but he never talked to me."

"What do you think happened to him?"

"What do I think? At first I figured he'd probably had a heart attack, but then I heard some kids say somebody beat him up."

"Why should he have a heart attack? He was only thirty-two."

"I don't know—I just thought—what did happen to him?"

Kestrel, still wearing rubber gloves, came out on the landing and along the corridor to where they were standing. "Did anybody turn the gas up or down on that space heater in there this morning?" he asked Monica.

"Not that I know of. It was on when I went in, and I didn't touch it."

"Would you know when was

the last time the wastebaskets in there were emptied?"

"Yesterday morning."

Auburn sent Monica about her business and followed Kestrel back into the office. "Got anything?"

"Not much. I wondered if it was as warm as this in here all night. Stamaty's taking his temperature to get a fix on the time of death. This ought to help, too." He pointed with his toe at a heap of litter on the floor where he had emptied Kuhlwein's wastebasket. Next to it was a clear evidence bag containing some small folding cartons, paper napkins, and a plastic plate, all smeared with traces of food.

"This stuff was apparently delivered here last night from the Yangtze Pagoda. Here's the order slip."

"One egg roll, one mu shu pork, one tea," Auburn read. Kuhlwein's name was misspelled Coolwine. The time of the phone order was seven eighteen.

"I'll get on this. What have you got in the bottle?"

"Water from that." Kestrel pointed to a shallow pan on the heater, evidently an improvised humidifier. "Looks awful grubby. Probably just mineral sediment and dirt, but it won't hurt to have it analyzed."

"Sure," nodded Auburn, dead-

pan. "Better take scrapings from the wallpaper, too."

"I think the mice beat me to it."

Stamaty phoned in an order to remove the body, and he and Kestrel packed up their evidence and equipment. Auburn divvied up the contents of Kuhlwein's pockets with Stamaty, retaining only the dead man's keys. He found Dollinger in the hall and showed him the bill from the Yangtze Pagoda.

"Call them and see if you can find out who delivered a meal here last night. Go talk to them and see what they can tell us."

"Where'll you be?"

"Personnel, to get his records. Then talking to his boss, whoever that is. If I can get loose by twelve or twelve thirty, I might meet you at the restaurant. It's just five or six blocks north, on the other side of the Oval."

In Personnel they already knew by the campus grapevine that Kuhlwein was dead. With a little prompting, the secretary there passed on the campus gossip that Kuhlwein was a boring lecturer, a hard grader, and an all-around scumbucket. He had no family and lived in an apartment within walking distance of the campus.

Auburn's next stop was back in Revere Hall to see Professor Mount, whose office was at the same end of the building as Pro-

fessor Kuhlwein's but one floor above. A secretary at a desk at the end of the corridor nodded him into the office of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology.

The first thing you noticed about Professor Mount was the fineness and delicacy of her features, unmarred by age (Auburn put her at about sixty), and giving a general impression of fragility. The second thing you noticed was that her fingers were cruelly gnarled with arthritis. An adjustable aluminum cane leaned against her desk within reach.

He had barely introduced himself when it became obvious that Professor Mount planned to get at least as much information as she gave. He saw no point in concealing the basic fact that Kuhlwein had evidently died during the night after being struck a blow on the chin that stunned him, causing him to fall and hit his head on the base of his chair.

She thought that over for a long time in silence, her face a study in bewilderment and indecision. Auburn forced himself to look away from the writhing, twisted fingers and examine the decor of the office, which was feminine yet businesslike. On a mantelpiece over a bricked-up fireplace stood rows of rubber balls, balls of yarn, and coffee

mugs stuffed with hundreds of pencils.

"I gather he wasn't popular with the students," said Auburn, to break into her trance.

"He wasn't popular with anybody that I know of," she said frankly, in a tone that suggested pity rather than reproach. "Every organization has one. Maybe every organization needs one, I don't know. It's hard to say anything positive about John."

"What did he teach exactly?"

"Classics. Latin and, when anybody signed up for it, Greek."

"I would have thought he belonged in the Language Department."

A smile, unexpectedly warm and almost coquettish, suddenly lit up her face "You're a very perceptive young man, sergeant, and you're exactly correct. John Kuhlwein had been with the university a little over three years. They put up with him for two of those years in the Language Department, and then the chair virtually kicked him out. Because she's an assistant provost, she succeeded in unloading him on me."

"He seems to have had a knack for making enemies wherever he went."

She put her head to one side and pursed her lips meditatively for a moment before replying. "Not enemies, exactly. Say

rather people who didn't respect him. He was a crackpot, you see, a sort of academic charlatan . . ."

"You mean he didn't know the stuff he was supposed to be teaching? I would have thought —"

"That was partly it, yes, although none of us in this department had enough competence in classical languages to judge him. But he had pretensions to scholarship he didn't possess."

"Such as?"

"Such as the Etruscan language. For two years he'd been compiling a dictionary of Etruscan, which everybody on the faculty had become heartily sick of hearing about. But the project was utterly beyond him. The only written records we have from the Etruscans are memorial and votive tablets. They were a people so wholly absorbed in the cult of the dead that they left no epics, no lyric or elegiac verse, no history—really nothing but tombstone inscriptions. Reconstructing the entire Etruscan language from the available materials is like—trying to write a dictionary and grammar of English based on a pile of Campbell's soup labels. I'm not sure anybody could do it, but I am sure John Kuhlwein couldn't have."

All this was getting Auburn

nowhere. "I guess what I came to ask you, professor, is whether you know of anybody around here who was particularly at odds with Kuhlwein, and who's enough of a hothead to have bashed him in his own office."

She got up and, leaving her cane behind, walked with jerky, birdlike movements to one of three windows in a row. Twisting in his chair, Auburn followed her gaze to a narrow strip of roof outside the windows, which sloped down slightly to a stone parapet.

Amid a jumble of stovepipes, guy wires, and old wooden packing cases, someone had set out a miniature garden in shallow troughs, visible from within the office but not from below. Some of the blooms had survived the first frosts of autumn and presented a colorful contrast with their dreary surroundings.

Professor Mount gazed thoughtfully at them for a long minute and then moved back to her desk. "My honest answer is that I know of no one—student, faculty, or staff—whom I can imagine committing unpremeditated murder against John Kuhlwein." She spoke with an air of finality and even, Auburn thought, of dismissal.

He didn't budge. "I wouldn't want you to get hung up on that word 'unpremeditated,'" he said. "That's something for the

lawyers to play around with. Who hated Kuhlwein enough to want him dead?"

She shook her head, a tight, probably painful gesture. "Nobody. Nobody here."

"Okay. Do you know offhand what kind of schedule Professor Kuhlwein had yesterday? I mean classes, meetings . . ."

"I know that he had lectures yesterday from nine to ten and from two to three. Also that he was in his office around five thirty in the afternoon, and apparently planning to make a night of it. He often did."

"You were there?"

"Yes, briefly, discussing departmental business." After a moment she added, "He was alive when I left."

"How long after that did you leave the campus? Or did you pull an all-nighter, too?"

Again she flashed him a rakish smile. "Department chairs don't pull all-nighters. Not when they're my age. I was locked away in my maximum security highrise downtown from about seven o'clock last night until almost seven this morning. I had an early meeting of the Graduate Records Advisory Board today."

"Are you Professor Cletus Hering's boss, too?"

"Yes, he's also in this department." She nodded toward the windows. "You've just been ad-

miring his garden. At least, he waters and weeds it, and I get the pleasure of watching it grow. I suppose you'll want to talk to him because he shared an office with John."

"Do you know where I could find him?"

"He's out of town—or was. He's probably home now, but I know he wasn't planning to come in to the campus until Monday. Loretta can give you his address and phone number."

"Thanks, I've got all that." He stood up. "Intriguing style of decoration," he remarked with a glance at the mantelpiece.

"Strictly symbolic. Of an arthritis victim's struggle to survive. Rubber balls to squeeze, yarn to knit. Against all odds."

"Where do the pencils come in?"

"I pick them up. Constantly. Everywhere. You'd be amazed how many pencils are dropped on a college campus in a week's time. Every pencil you see there I personally bent down and retrieved from oblivion. Every one is a triumph of mind over matter."

Auburn got no answer at Hering's home phone. He caught up with Dollinger at the Yangtze Pagoda, and together they interviewed the delivery man, who had just come on duty at noon. He'd left Professor Kuhlwein

alive and cantankerous between seven forty-five and eight P.M. He'd delivered meals to him in the evening there a number of times before but otherwise was unacquainted with him.

After lunch Auburn and Dollinger spent an hour searching Kuhlwein's apartment and finding nothing surprising or illuminating. From there they went on to Professor Hering's, which was within walking distance.

The house was a low, rambling white frame, almost buried in a grove of evergreens, with a screened verandah on two sides. The woman who opened the door seemed almost to be expecting them. She led them to a long room that combined the features of a chemical laboratory and an artist's studio. Figurines, fragments of pottery, plans and sketches lay everywhere on shelves and workbenches. The professor was sitting in front of an illuminated screen sorting projector slides. Auburn noted mechanically that he was left-handed and that his fingers were long and strong like those of a sculptor or a surgeon.

"So it's true," said Hering, barely looking up from his work. With his thick glasses and neatly trimmed beard streaked with gray, his refined features and pugnacious man-

ner, he looked like a college professor straight out of a TV sitcom.

"What's true?"

"That John Kuhlwein committed suicide. That's why you're here, isn't it? April heard it on the news."

"It's true he's dead. Apparently he was assaulted sometime last night in his office—your office."

"Oh really? Tell me about it."

"I was hoping you could tell me something about it."

Hering sat up straight and put aside his work. His wife sat down behind him on a stool with a somewhat sheltering manner.

"Hey, don't look at me. I've been in Boston for the past twenty-four hours. April just picked me up at the airport forty-five minutes ago."

"When was the last time you saw Professor Kuhlwein?"

"Sit down, both of you. You want something to drink? I saw John about ten o'clock yesterday morning in the office. He was alive and kicking then. Especially kicking."

"He seems to have been pretty generally disliked. How did you get along with him?"

Professor Hering had a disconcerting trick of drawing air in sharply through his nostrils before opening his mouth to speak. "Mostly I left him alone. Sure, we shared an office, but I

do most of my work here, so we didn't have a whole lot of contact—except when his research project overflowed onto my desk."

"The Etruscan dictionary?"

"You've heard about that, too. Yes, the Etruscan dictionary. He was at it all day and half the night. The noxious drudge."

Auburn looked at Dollinger and Dollinger looked at Auburn.

"Excuse the professorial humor—sort of an in joke. Samuel Johnson, who compiled the first great English dictionary in the eighteenth century, indulged his bent for puckish humor by defining *lexicographer* as 'a maker of dictionaries, a harmless drudge.'"

"I gather you didn't consider Professor Kuhlwein so harmless?"

"Harmless? He was Attila the Hun and the Black Death rolled into one. I don't know how familiar you are with the financial structure of a private university ..."

Auburn's shrug extended from one horizon to the other.

"... but I can assure you that *this* private university simply could not survive without federal grant money. Nearly every departmental budget is predicated on the ability of faculty to obtain grants-in-aid for research projects from government agencies and philanthropic organizations. Coffee smells done, April.

"Don't go to sleep on me here, gentlemen. I assure you this is leading somewhere. John Kuhlwein is—was—chairman of the university's internal review board for grant applications. They stuck him with the job because nobody else wanted it and he had low seniority. Then the government issued a much more elaborate set of standards and guidelines that gave him almost unlimited power, and virtually indemnified him against removal from office for the next two years."

"Didn't the other members of the board have any say?"

"Some. But the chairman is empowered to make a summary decision on grant applications for amounts less than a hundred thousand dollars unless the money is to be spent abroad or human experimentation is involved. As anybody on campus will tell you, Kuhlwein abused his authority right and left—pressuring his colleagues and blackmailing the administration to further his own ambitions and feather his own nest."

"And ensure his advancement in the university, even though he didn't quite measure up academically?" suggested Auburn. He accepted a cup of coffee from April Hering.

The professor was looking at him a little oddly. "Oh, I imagine his scholarship was sound

enough. We academic types always stand in awe of the classicist—he's the scholar's scholar. John's command of Latin and Greek put him in a sort of intellectual stratosphere."

"And how about his command of Etruscan?"

Hering shrugged and blew on his coffee. "You'd have to ask Edith Mount about that—the chair of our department. She's the authority on the Etruscans—their history, anyway. Wrote a book about them two or three years ago that set the whole archaeological world on its ear and incidentally put our department on the map."

"Your own field is—?"

"Archaeology and geographic anthropology. I specialize in Near Eastern cultures."

"Were you in Boston on business?"

"Yes, I conducted a graduate seminar this morning on Assyrian and Babylonian decorative motifs at the Halliwell Academy of Design. I do that every year around this time."

"You flew both ways?"

Hering's manner became slightly stuffier when he realized he was being invited to establish an alibi. "That's the usual arrangement, isn't it? I took off around one thirty yesterday afternoon, checked into my hotel in Boston around two forty-five, met with colleagues during

the afternoon, had dinner with them, spent the night at the hotel, held my seminar from eight to eleven today, and caught a flight out of Boston at eleven fifty. My airline receipt, hotel bills, and restaurant checks are all in the hands of the bursar at the Academy so he can reimburse me."

"Well, that settles that," said Auburn pleasantly. "Do you know of anybody who might have visited Professor Kuhlwein at the office after eight o'clock last night, and got into an argument with him that turned violent?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. Yes, by George, though, I do!" He jerked upright and put down his cup, his eyes wide behind the thick lenses. "I stepped into the office around noon yesterday to pick up my mail, and met one of John's students coming out. Kid looked mad as a hornet. I even warned John that he might be homicidal—jokingly, of course."

"Do you know this student's name?"

"No. Goodlooking kid—almost too goodlooking if you know what I mean. Eyes like a girl's."

"Think you'd recognize him if you saw him again, or saw a picture of him?"

"Probably. I'm not sure I'd want to," he added enigmatically.

Auburn examined his features

closely. "I'm afraid we can't shut down a murder investigation just because everybody thought the victim was a creep. Did you hear anything they said?"

Hering frowned. "Something about a tug of war, I think."

"Any idea what they were talking about?"

"Probably the same old thing—grades. That's all students really care about. As long as you give 'em good grades, they don't care a hoot whether they learn anything or not."

When Auburn checked in at headquarters he found that Stamaty had faxed him a preliminary report on the autopsy from the coroner's office in the courthouse across the street. Kuhlwein had died of a massive epidural hemorrhage due to a blow on the left temple, which had fractured his skull. His jaw was also fractured, in two places, evidently as a result of a powerful uppercut that had felled him and apparently caused him to strike his head on the base of his office chair. The time of death was around midnight, assuming no one had set the heat up or down afterwards. But death might have occurred hours after the assault.

Auburn called Stamaty. "What are the chances he just fell and hit his chin on the edge of his desk?"

"I'd say pretty slim unless he was blind drunk or high on something. The lab reports won't be back until tomorrow."

Auburn put Dollinger to work checking alibis and went back to the campus. Classes were over for the day in Revere Hall, but the outer doors were still standing open and a few students lingered here and there in the halls. Someone had shut off the gas in Kuhlwein's office, and the room was as damp and chilly as a cellar. Auburn sat down at the desk and stared up through the thickening murk of afternoon at the high, dirty ceiling for a while, inhaling the peculiar smell of dust, old books, and old oak furniture that hung in the room. Then he put on the lights.

The office was basically in the state in which Kestrel had left it. Smudges of dusting powder here and there on the furniture and other objects bore witness to his fruitless search for latent prints. Without much curiosity, Auburn glanced over the dozens of scraps of paper that lay everywhere in little heaps, bearing cryptic inscriptions in Etruscan, Greek, Latin, or perhaps some combination of them.

From the variations in shape, color, and texture of the slips he surmised that Kuhlwein had made them by cutting up scrap paper and used envelopes. He turned over more than a hun-

dred before finding one that was a page torn off Kuhlwein's desk calendar and bearing yesterday's date. It also bore the note, "Barrone K—12:00."

In a drawer he found lists of the students enrolled in all of Kuhlwein's classes—Latin I (two sections), Latin II, Scientific Terminology, and Introduction to Classical Literature—ninety-six students in all, barring the enrollment of some in more than one class, which didn't seem worth checking on at the moment.

Kevin Barrone's name appeared on one of the class lists for Latin I. Auburn picked up Kuhlwein's phone and called the registrar's office, catching a secretary who was just on the point of closing the office for the day but who obligingly gave him the information he needed.

On a hunch, he placed a second call to headquarters, which elicited the information that Kevin Barrone had had three arrests—two for public intoxication and one for assault—but no convictions. "Oh, he's *that* Barrone," he said as the records clerk finished reading the file out to him. Kevin's father owned three furniture stores and was both prominent and influential in the community.

Howarth Hall, the dormitory where Kevin lived, was only five minutes' walk away. It was sev-

en o'clock when the student at the desk in the lobby waved Auburn in without looking up from the textbook in front of him. Raucous music howled down the corridor and bounced off the walls. The air was steamy from the showers and redolent of aftershave—or was it hairspray?

The door of Kevin's room stood open—a small room, decorated with posters on which Kevin's mother had probably never been invited to pass judgment. Of the two young men slouched at their respective desks, Auburn easily picked out Kevin from Professor Hering's description. His hair was long, black, and curly, and so were his eyelashes. A diamond glinted in his left earlobe. His T-shirt bore the motto "Drink Early—Drink Deep—Drink Often" in screaming red and yellow letters.

Auburn knocked on the door frame, identified himself, and for form's sake asked which one was Kevin Barrone. He was quick to notice that neither the hand that held the pencil nor the one that held the can of beer showed any swelling or discoloration. "Is there somewhere we can talk? Privately?"

"I'm gone," said Kevin's roommate, who scooped up books and papers and was.

"I imagine you've heard Professor Kuhlwein was found dead in his office this morning?"

Kevin looked him over truculently. "I heard a rumor to that effect," he said with exaggerated precision. "You taking up a collection?"

"No, I'm here because I think it's possible you were the last person to see him alive. The *very* last."

Kevin frowned, more in puzzlement, Auburn thought, than in alarm. "How do you figure that?"

Auburn pushed the door nearly shut. "Don't say anything—just listen to me for a minute. We can place you in Professor Kuhlwein's office late last evening. No, don't say anything yet. Nobody actually saw you slug him, so if we find out that you did, it'll be because you told us."

"What do—"

"Just hang on a minute. You didn't walk in there with the intention of killing him. You're not that dumb. And you didn't reach across his desk and sock him with the intention of killing him, either. Even if we had the whole thing on videotape, the most we could make out of it would be manslaughter—probably only aggravated assault."

"Hey, what are you trying to pin on me?"

"I'm not trying to pin anything on you. I just want to get this over with so I can go home before my wife feeds my dinner to

the cat." (Auburn had neither wife nor cat.)

"Who said I was up there last night?"

"You're not denying it, are you?"

"Certainly I'm denying it. You can't prove I was anywhere near Revere Hall last night."

"Can you prove you weren't?"

"Hey, Rob. Hey, *Rob!*" Kevin's roommate pushed the door open and peered in.

"Where was I last night?"

"How should I know?"

"Come on, dip—was I here in the room all night or not?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I wasn't here myself." Kevin waved him away in disgust.

"Look," he said, "whoever you talked to is either mixed up or lying. The only time in my life I was ever in Warm Beer's office was yesterday at noon, when I had an appointment to see him. He treated me like a piece of garbage. I wish I *had* punched him out, but I didn't. And I was here in this room all afternoon and evening studying for a stats midterm, except when I went to the cafeteria for dinner. So nobody saw me anywhere else."

He sloshed the remains of the beer in the can, chugged it, crumpled the can with one hand, flung it at an overflowing wastebasket in the corner, and missed.

"Okay. If you think of anything else you want to tell me,

one of the numbers on this card will get me day or night."

Auburn wiped sweat from his face as he left the dormitory and told himself he would have pushed his bluff much harder if he hadn't known who the kid's father was.

He stopped for dinner at a fast-food place adjoining the campus where everybody, including the manager, seemed to be at least twenty years younger than he was. From a phone booth there he tracked down Fritz Dollinger at headquarters. Professors Mount and Hering's alibis had stood up so far under discreet investigation.

"One thing, though, sergeant. Hering's movements from about eight P.M. yesterday until about seven A.M. today are unaccounted for. Boston's only a hundred and seventy-five miles away ..."

"Good point. Check with the hotel where Hering stayed and see if he rented a car through them. If he didn't, get the Boston yellow pages and start calling rental agencies. I'll be on the campus for a while yet. I'll call in after I leave."

As he walked back to Revere Hall, a thin autumn rain was falling, really little more than a mist. Auburn could see his breath against a distant floodlight as he stood looking up at Kuhlwein's office windows from

the sidewalk. The building was locked for the night, but he found a key on Kuhlwein's ring that got him in.

Up in the office he spent a long time at the grimy window, staring out over the campus. Resisting the temptation to turn on the heat, he poked among the books on the shelves and finally selected four to take away with him. He also rummaged through the professor's voluminous and untidy files and took possession of two sheaves of papers.

Monica Mallory was fifteen minutes late starting work on Friday morning. She found Cyrus Auburn and Fritz Dollinger pacing up and down the corridor on the main level, where they could see her come in no matter which door she used.

"I thought maybe you decided to quit after what happened yesterday morning," said Auburn.

"My roommate took my hair dryer home with her last night. They don't care if I start a little late, though, as long as I have all the offices done by nine."

"I think you said you've been cleaning all the offices in this building since the beginning of September?"

"That's right." She unlocked a closet and pulled out a large plastic trash barrel on wheels.

"So you'd probably know if

something in one of the offices was moved or missing."

"I don't know. I might. I just empty the trash and do light dusting."

Ultralight, thought Auburn, looking at her delicately manicured fingernails and remembering the gritty feel of things in Kuhlwein's office.

"Mind coming upstairs with us for a minute? Got your pass-key?"

"Yes, but I've got to—"

"This won't take you more than five minutes. Help the cops, have a friend downtown for life."

She took them up to the third floor on the service elevator, whose existence Auburn hadn't suspected, and which she opened and operated with a key. Even with some prompting from Auburn, Monica couldn't be sure anything was missing from Professor Mount's office.

He let her go back to the ground floor to get on with her work. After locking the door of the office, he climbed out a window to the small wedge of roof where Professor Hering's garden looked shriveled and forlorn in the rusty dawn. Very soon he called Dollinger out to join him.

Opposite this end of Revere Hall lay an irregular plot of waste ground, roughly triangular, hidden by high hedges from passersby but readily visible from above. "Fritz, I want you to

go down there and search that area inside the hedge. Let me tell you what you're going to find."

It was nearly nine o'clock when Professor Mount approached her office from the direction of the elevator, the tightly furled golf umbrella she was using instead of a cane tapping along the gloomy corridor to the rhythm of her jerky gait.

She found Auburn waiting outside her office at the department secretary's desk, on which he had placed two brown paper bags, one bulky and one small.

"Where have you been shopping this early in the morning?" she asked.

"Haven't been shopping anywhere. This stuff is all treasure trove—more accurately, plunder. Have you got a few minutes?"

"Certainly. No classes or meetings until ten." She unlocked her office, preceded him inside, and turned on the lights. Auburn carried his parcels in and put them on the floor.

"Excuse the chill in here." She checked to see if the windows were shut. "Maybe you don't feel it the way I do. In the students' jargon this is 'McMix Hall' because the date it was built is down there on the cornerstone—1909 in Roman numerals. It used to have steam heat, but

that got to be too expensive, so back in the sixties they converted to gas, and . . . But listen to my morning coffee rambling on. You didn't come here to hear an old woman chatter."

Auburn had seated himself across the desk from her. "I need some advice. We've already narrowed our investigation down to just a couple of suspects, but I have a feeling we're not going to get much further without some help from an expert."

"I can't imagine that I'm the kind of expert you need," she said. She had unpacked her briefcase and was now putting in order things that Monica Mallory had probably knocked awry while dusting the desk.

"Well, I believe you are. You know these people."

Her habitually rigid posture became still more rigid, and a look of grave concern settled on her finely chiseled features. "I know your suspects?"

"Better than I do, anyway, even though I spent half the night reading about them."

"Reading about . . . ?"

"The Etruscans and the Mycenaeans—is that the way you say it? I didn't get all the way through your book—"

"Sergeant, what on earth is this?" A flush of embarrassment and, no doubt about it, of gratification showed through her face powder.

"I think the Etruscans and the Mycenaeans are behind Professor Kuhlwein's death."

If she thought he'd lost his marbles, she showed no sign of wanting to end the conversation just yet. "If you got through even the first chapter of my book," she said, "you know that the Etruscans *were* the Mycenaeans."

"I know that's your theory—a bold and brilliant stroke, solving two historical enigmas at once: where did the Mycenaeans go when they left Crete, and where had the Etruscans come from when they suddenly appeared in western Italy?"

"It's not just a theory any more. Most of the authorities who have given the evidence a fair appraisal have accepted it as historical fact."

"I know. But there's evidence and then there's evidence. You based your conclusions on a comparison of social institutions, metalworking techniques, and burial customs. Professor Kuhlwein, working with linguistic evidence, came up with entirely different conclusions. In fact, he was getting ready to expose your theory as false if you didn't come across with more perquisites and privileges than went with his rank."

She seemed to shrink and fade before his eyes, her hands thrashing helplessly among the papers on her desk. "How could

you possibly know anything about that?" she asked in a harsh whisper.

Auburn picked up the smaller bag from the floor, reached inside it, and drew out a dirt-streaked off-white rubber ball about the size of a softball with a length of dark blue yarn tied around its circumference. Auburn's and Dollinger's initials and the date were written on the ball in indelible marker. Professor Mount sat immobile, her eyes fixed in fascination on the ball.

"I found this down below," said Auburn, "where you threw it early yesterday morning. These three rust marks correspond exactly to the position of the rods that hold the rain cap over that vent pipe out on the roof—the vent of Professor Kuhlwein's space heater. The yarn, which you used to pull the ball out of the vent after it had done its work, exactly matches some of the yarn there on your mantelpiece. I found strands of it inside the top of the vent. The girl who cleans your office recognized this ball as one that used to be up there with the others until yesterday."

"And I thought—"

He interrupted her with a peremptory gesture and read her her rights.

"Where's the good of remaining silent?" she asked, now more

composed. "You've got it all figured out to the last detail. John Kuhlwein was a worm. Brilliant, but a worm." She paused to reflect, and a sudden impish smile erased the remaining signs of anguish from her face.

"You probably don't read mystery stories, but I do. When the villain of a penny dreadful—a five ninety-five dreadful these days—says to somebody, 'You're history,' he means, 'You're dead.' Well, John Kuhlwein is now history—as surely a part of history as Alexander the Great and Charles the Bald."

"And you put him there."

"And I put him there. It was an experiment. Ordinarily, you know, we historians don't do experiments. Although we like to think of ourselves as scientists of sorts, the data are already there when we come along. We may have to dig for them, but we don't—we mustn't—generate them. But this was an experiment because, of course, I couldn't know in advance whether it would work or not. If it didn't, there was no harm done, and I could always try something else later."

A long, awkward silence followed. At times Auburn felt the discretionary powers vested in him as a policeman to be an almost intolerable burden, and this was one of those times. He had foreseen the anguish of this

moment and, taking no chances with his objectivity, had made sure it was Dollinger who found the rubber ball.

"You know I have to take you downtown, don't you?"

"Yes, I do know that." She was looking frail and helpless again. "Does the—does my reason for killing John have to come out? I think I'd rather go to jail with my scholarly reputation intact than live out the years until I retire, and after, in disgrace as a crackpot."

"Well, professor, as I expect you know better than I do, historical truth has a way of coming out in the end, just like murder. But here in this bag I've got Professor Kuhlwein's Etruscan dictionary, and all the stuff I could find in his notes supporting his counter-theory on the origins of the Etruscans, and I'm going to hand it over to you as his department chair—"

"Now I'm going to cry."

"—just as soon as you've signed a statement downtown."

He saw her booked for first-degree murder, and left as soon as bail had been set. Was he pushing back human history a hundred years by handing over Kuhlwein's research notes to her for destruction? Or only the *study* of history? Or only a theory? And was there really any difference?

Auburn's superiors weren't

stingy with computers. He was entering his report when the phone rang.

"Cy? Nick Stamaty. I've been looking for you for three hours. Might have saved you some grief if I could have found you sooner."

"Really? How's that?"

"Lab stuff is in. Get this. Alcohol and drugs, zip. But his carboxyhemoglobin level was over fifty percent. Your theory about him falling and knocking himself out on the edge of his desk is currently enjoying great popu-

larity with the coroner. Anyhow he's probably going to sign it out as an accidental death.

"We called the power and light company and the university maintenance people, and whichever one got there first was going to shut off the gas in that space heater until they get the vent open. A bird probably built a nest on top of the damper last spring. When I think how much time I spent in there yesterday—"

Cyrus Auburn hung up the phone very quietly.

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FICTION

THE DEVIL TO PAY

Don Marshall



Illustration by Kevin Kreneck

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/96

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Simon leaned back, a look of wonder on his face. "Let me get this straight. You want *me* to represent *you*?"

As Bear Valley's only mortician, dentist, and legal counsel, very little caught Simon Nickolas off guard, but the unexpected request of the man seated in front of him was downright incredible.

"You're my last hope, Simon; things are a real mess down there."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but in the past didn't people like Daniel Webster always represent the misguided fool who sold his soul to the Devil?"

"Please don't bring that one up again. Webster just got lucky, that's all. Besides, this is an entirely different situation. I need your help."

"You got yourself into it, Lou. You've always been greedy, and greed, as you know, is one of the Seven Deadly Sins . . ."

"Don't tell *me* about sin, Simon; I wrote the book. I was just following the rules, you know; they can't be bent."

"You have a signed contract?"

"Of course I have a signed contract. That's the whole problem—signed it myself and he did, too. You've got to break it, find a loophole. This damned Irishman Paddy McDonahough has made my life a living hell, I tell you."

"You must have plenty of attorneys down there . . ."

"I do, thousands. They're the cream of the crop, rotten to the core . . . contract attorneys, criminal attorneys, real estate attorneys, divorce attorneys. They're the slickest, slimiest, lowest down, smoothest talking lawyers that ever walked the earth. In fact, I'm thinking of expanding—overcrowding, you know, and more arriving every day."

"Then, why me? You have all you need."

"None of them can hold a candle to you, Simon."

"Thank you, but Paddy McDonahough was a mean, miserable labor organizer. He'd shoot a man just for the hell of it. People around here thanked God when that dynamite charge blew his mangy soul to hell and gone. How about a little snort of Black Spaniel?"

"Thank you, I brought a touch of my own . . . Old Hellfire, my boys really go for it."

"But I have to admit that Paddy, in spite of his murdering ways, was a crackerjack miner . . ."

"Why do you think I wanted him?"

" . . . and organizer," continued Simon, using the interruption to down his drink. "Mean as he was, he fought tooth and nail for the miners. His men would fol-

low him anywhere. Now that you've got him, why are you crying? Better yet, why did you put him under contract in the first place?"

"Because I had a shortage of trained personnel. Demons may be great whipcrackers; but not a damned one of 'em can sink a shaft. Join me in a smoke?"

Lucifer handed a cheroot to Simon, lit both with his fingertip, and continued. "I thought that two-bit, bribetaking mick would be just the ticket."

"And now you're asking me to break the contract?"

"Absolutely! I turned over the entire east wing to him, top and bottom sulphur levels. Did he appreciate that? No! The whole place has gone to hell!"

"Seems to me he'd be right at home."

"That's what I thought, too. He took one look at the tunnel shoring, told the condemned it should be condemned, declared it an occupational hazard, and every last soul walked. He's demanding I install double up-rights and crossmembers every ten feet. I found out later he owned a controlling interest in your local lumberyard."

"That he did, pulled the same stunt, too. He closed down the mines until he sold every last one of his timbers . . . pocketed a fortune on that one. The mine

owners still haven't recouped their losses."

"With the miles and miles of tunnels I've got down there, do you know how much that would cost?"

"You're the boss, aren't you?"

"Of course I am, but that rabblouser's worked every lost soul into a frenzy. He's promised them better working conditions, no more twenty-four-hour days, health benefits, a twenty year retirement plan, sick leave, paid vacations based on seniority. On *seniority!*

"Can you imagine what that will do? We've got Nero, Attila the Hun, Robin Hood . . . oh no, wait a minute, not him . . . but we've got senators up the wazoo."

"There'll be the devil to pay."

"Stop with the jokes, already. I'll tell you, Simon, I'm in one hell of a mess. With this union he's set up, the whole system's fallen apart. The condemned are living the life of Riley, and I'm going through hell.

"He holds meetings, he exhorts and screams and calls me a capitalistic pig exploiter of the laboring class. He's put up signs all over the place: **THROW OFF THE SHACKLES!**, **SEVER THE CHAINS!**, **PROLETARIANS, UNITE!** My own fiends, my demons whom I have trusted for centuries, nay, eons of centuries, have joined his union. I'm the

only one left standing, everybody else is on a sitdown strike!"

"That's a hell of a note."

"Ahh, come on, Simon, I've got a headache."

"Sorry, Lou, I just couldn't resist the . . . heh heh, temptation."

"That ingrate went hellbent for election, and now he's their spokesman . . . no more salt in the water cooler, no hot seats in the restrooms, no more boiling oil, just a low simmer. I'm a nervous wreck."

"There, there. You're getting too hot under the collar. Want a chunk of ice in your drink?"

"You said that just to hurt me."

"It's just that we morticians express our humor through the, ah, jugular vein. It's hard to suppress sometimes. Ahem! Now to business. Have you considered sending Paddy someplace worse, Tulsa, for instance?"

"Tulsa? I can't think of anyplace worse, but the rules won't permit it."

"I see. Well, I'm not saying I'll take the case, but did you bring a copy of the contract?"

The distraught Prince of Darkness handed over an asbestos scroll. "They want ventilation." His voice approached hysteria. "Ventilation, mind you; in the bottomless pit the fumes cause miner's lung. We've

never had ventilation down there!"

His hand shook as he poured a stiff shot of Old Hellfire, a few spilled drops snapped and crackled on the desk, a wisp of smoke twirled upward.

"Ooops, sorry." Lucifer wiped the scorched area. "See how nervous I am? I'll send up one of the boys to repair that."

"No need."

"Ear plugs," Lucifer babbled; "the roar of flames and the hiss of steam, that crook says, cause deafness at that depth . . ."

Simon adjusted his glasses, relit his cheroot, and scanned the document. "Mmmm, uh-huh, Party of the First Part, known as Satan, Old Scratch, Old Nick, Beelzebub . . ."

"I know all that, I prefer Lucifer. Get on with it, for God's sake."

" . . . does hereby guarantee seven years of good fortune (*such good fortune to be described, in detail, in the applicant's own handwriting in space provided below*) to Paddy McDonahough, a hardrock miner of Bear Valley, California."

Simon stopped reading, scratched his chin, refilled his glass. "Why is this part in Paddy's handwriting?"

"I make everybody write out their own contract so's there's no mistake. I was always on the hot seat for not listing all their de-

mands. Of course—" a look of shocked innocence crossed his features "—I wouldn't *think* of cheating, but try to tell those chisellers that. I honored those contracts to the letter, not my fault they shortchanged themselves."

"I see. Let me continue . . . hereinafter known as Party of the Second Part, etc., etc., and at the end of such seven years the soul of the second party does then belong, part and parcel, bag and baggage, lock, stock, and barrel, to Party of the First Part and from thence on said soul will suffer forever, or for all eternity, whichever is longer."

Simon peered over his glass at Lucifer. "That's about as iron-clad as it comes, Lou."

" . . . and another thing. Medicinal salve for blisters! Have you ever heard of anything like that? How can it be hell if the blisters don't hurt? And no more hotfeet, he says. If I can't give a hotfoot now and then . . . ohhh, I tell you, Simon, that man is evil."

"Unfortunately, Lou, the contract stipulates that neither party can cancel the agreement. Perhaps you were a bit hasty in signing, since Paddy was already yours in any event. Looks to me like he's beaten you at your own game."

"Never! One way or another that man will pay!"

"Aha! I just might have an angle. But first, about my fee . . ."

"Up to now, he's only worked the sulphur pits and look at the trouble he's caused. Can you imagine what would happen if I transferred him to anthracite, or the lava tubes?"

"About my fee?"

"Oh sure, Simon, anything you want. I brought another contract. Here, it's already made out, just sign at the bottom."

"Lou, you know better than that."

"Just thought I'd try."

"How about a new roof for the local church?"

"Aaaagh! Don't toy with me, I feel low enough as it is."

"Just kidding. The lad Andrew, my young assistant, his grades have been slipping lately."

"I'll get rid of the teacher and send up a real looker. She'll teach him the facts of life in no time."

"No, no, nothing so drastic, just give him a little boost here and there. He doesn't have to know anything about it. And, from now on, no more of your devilish temptations."

"Agreed. Is that all?"

"Not quite. Black Spaniel, my favorite distiller, has fallen on hard times, not because of me, understand, I try my best . . ."

"Don't give it another thought, Simon, the problem is ended. I'll keep the world loaded up with boozers, they'll be drinking up a storm. Black Spaniel has nothing to worry about."

"Don't go overboard, just enough so my stock holds firm. Anyway, I think I have a solution to your problem. A simple transfer, a new location ought to do the trick."

"Transfer? New location? That's impossible. The Book clearly states that an unrepentant soul must suffer eternal punishment. Hell no, I'm afraid a transfer is out of the question. This is the end of the line."

"Devil take the hindmost?"

"See! You're doing it to me again!"

"Not so fast, Lou, remember the old saying, 'Let no man put apart what God has rent asunder.' We're going to rend him asunder. What is the worst possible fate to inflict on a rabid labor organizer like Paddy McDonahough?"

"Having nobody to organize?" replied Lucifer hopefully.

"Exactly. With that in mind, I quote from his written statement: 'I will, if necessary, go to hell and back to enforce this contract.'"

"So?"

"That's innocent enough in verbal form but quite damning in a written contract. Every sit-

uation inherently includes an opposite option—right-left, backward-forward, up-down, heaven-hell. He's agreed to suffer, yet is happy as hell running the union down there."

"So?"

"What would make a labor organizer absolutely miserable?"

"Boiling in oil, being torn apart by wild beasts, roasting over hot coals, listening to Republican campaign promises . . ."

"Oh, come on, Lou, we're not living in the Dark Ages. Use your imagination. How about a place where everyone is happy, where existence is perfect, where no one works. No matter how much he rants and raves, no one listens. It would drive him nuts."

"There's only one place like that. Wait, you mean send him up . . .?"

"It's your legal obligation to deport him to heaven, the only place he'll suffer the tortures of the damned."

"The devil, you say! For eternity! Living with angels, how boring, how fiendish! He'll be miserable as hell! Simon, you devil, I knew I could count on you."

The archfiend clapped and skipped about the room. "If you ever want a permanent position, just look me up, er, down. Oh boy, how ironic. Think of what

this will do to the Big Man . . . he'll be sore as . . . as hell. I owe you big time, pal. Ho-ho, heehee-hahah!

A flash, a thunderclap, Simon sat alone.

With the first blush of morning light, Andrew came downstairs rubbing his eyes.

"Good morning, Andrew, sleep well?"

"Good morning, Mr. Nickolas. Not really, sir. I dreamed I peeked through a crack in the floor and heard you talking, but nobody was there. I heard a scary laugh, then there was a

big flash and thunder, and everything smelled like sulphur and . . ."

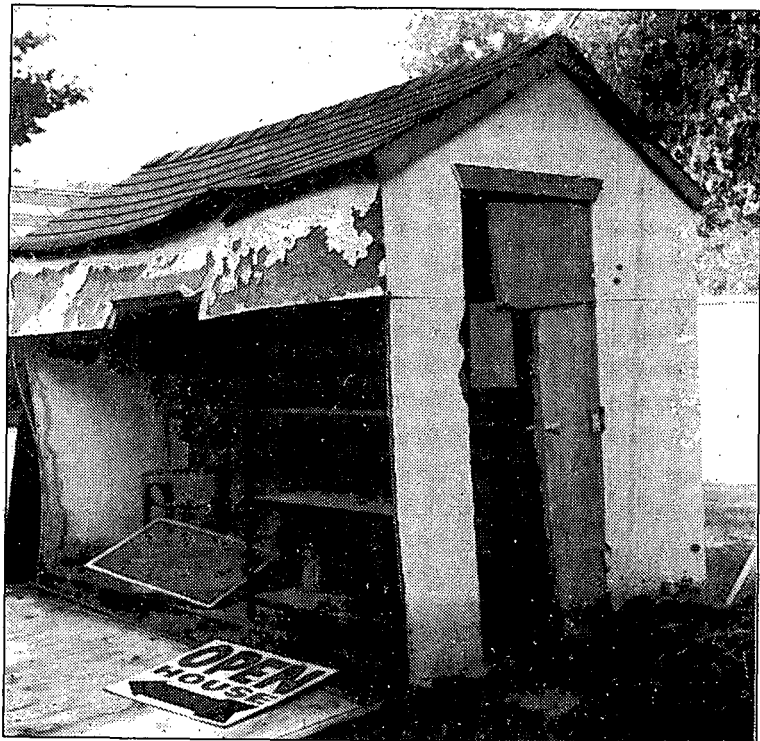
"Eggs, Andrew. Remember the miners' picnic yesterday? I warned you about eating too many deviled eggs. Gluttony is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, you know. Now, time for school, off with you."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be gone when you get home. I have some Change of Venue papers to file at the recorder's office. Don't forget to rub some furniture polish over that scorched spot on my desk."

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



William F. Smith, Garden Grove, Calif.

(Sundays, two to four thirty.) We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

Down on the Farm

Bentley Dadmun

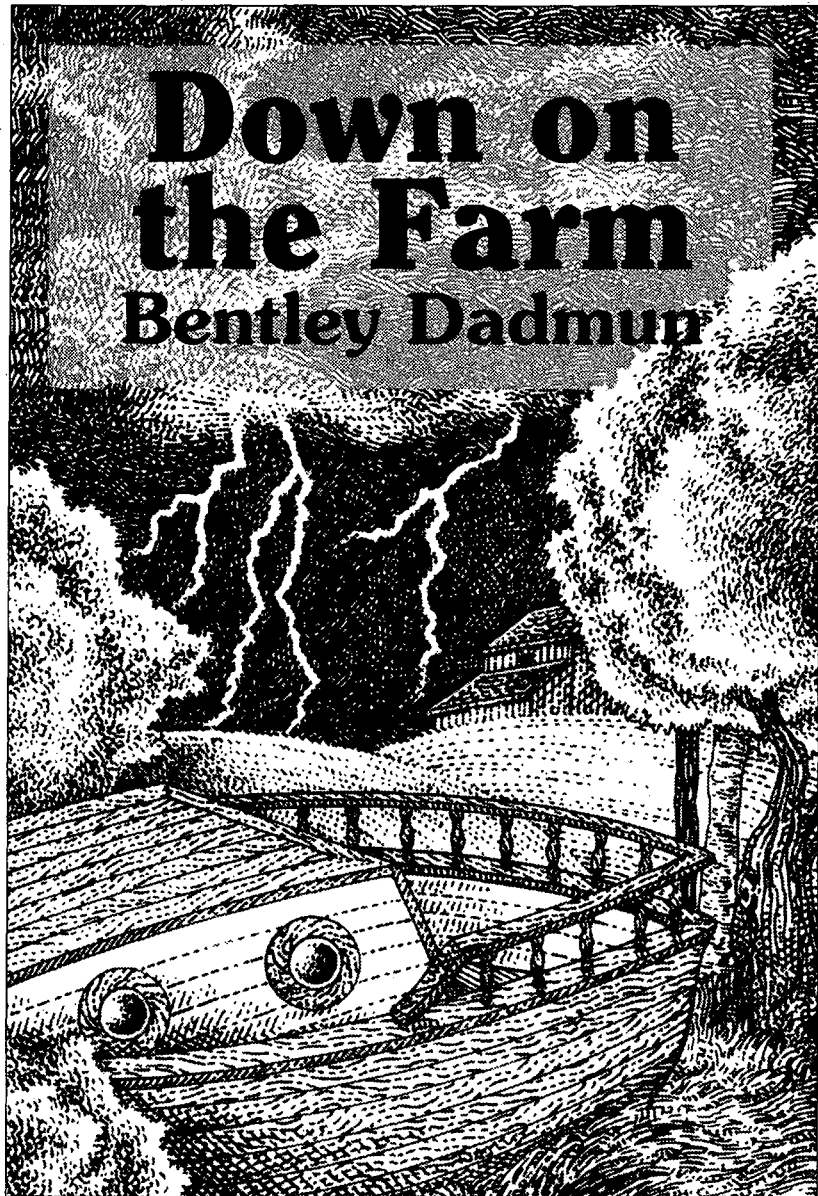


Illustration by David M. Simon

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/96

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The storm was gaining on me, teasing me with erratic winds and sporadic drops of cold rain. I don't mind getting wet; my only transportation is a mountain bike, and I'm used to nature dumping on me. It's the lightning I don't like, and stabbing, crackling explosions of the stuff lit up the boiling black cloud. I never bothered to understand lightning, but I do know that one bolt has a zillion volts and enough amps to fry a thousand lawyers.

I stood on the pedals and pumped faster, tacking from one side of the crumbling blacktop to the other, skirting the deeper potholes of the neglected road. With fear of frying juicing the nerves, I made the last mile in record time and turned off the old blacktop onto the narrow, rutted, sand and dirt road that led to the farm.

Even on a mountain bike with its wide, knobby tires and stump-pulling gears, sand is treacherous stuff, so as usual I went onto the grass beside the driveway and pedaled along as fast as I dared. Halfway in I passed a town rescue truck, its lights off, bucking and bulling its way to the road. Behind it was a town cruiser, a hulking dark blue thing with a stark white badge on the driver's door throwing plumes of dirty sand as it slewed up the road.


Braking gently, I glided down a long slope to the farm and coasted into the barnyard just as a black hearse was pulling out. Several people huddled by the front of the barn watching the hearse leave. As I pedaled past, I yelled out, "What happened?"

James Brewster, an irritating gent in his seventies who always wore white bib overalls, yelled back, "It's Lucy Krebs, she's dead."

I yelled out, "How?" at the same time a dog-killing blast of thunder swept over the farm. Brewster yelled something back, but it was lost in the thunder and I wasn't going to stop and chat about it.

In 1956 Bob Atkins decided it would be nice to have a farm. So he bought Riverside Farm, a hundred-year-old structure with the house and barn in one long unit. This was a common feature of farms in New England in those good old days when they worked fourteen hours a day for twenty or thirty years and then died. It made it easier to tend the animals in the winter—you didn't get lost in those howling blizzards that supposedly occurred back then.

Atkins' farm was seven miles out of town and fifty yards from the Pemegiwasset River. His wife Annie was a veterinarian, and had a flourishing business



in town. Bob added forty feet to the existing barn so Annie could run her clinic at the farm.

When everything was completed and running smoothly, Bob had a stroke, the kind where one drools a lot, and died a year later. Annie found herself with an empty farm in a remote area by a part of the river nobody was interested in.

She hung in there, making enough as a vet to get by, and over the years Atkins' Riverside Farm filled up, not with livestock and tractors and all that other farm stuff, but with destitute senior citizens with few belongings and meager Social Security checks.

Now the farm is home to around forty indigent people who, for whatever reason, have slipped over the side of that great ship *American Dream*. We are a co-op and give most of our SS checks to Annie and grow gardens and chop wood and generally cope. Annie, a retired vet now, is the mayor of a tiny village of old broke people with nowhere else to go.

I pedaled up to the long, high gate at the far end of the barn, wrestled it open, pushed the bike through, and got the damn thing closed again. Wired to the gate was a rusted ammo can. I opened it, pulled out my mail, and headed across the pasture, passing the farm's five bellow-

ing, bug-eyed cows stampeding back to the big shed where they lived. They don't like lightning either. The shed once stored all the stuff needed by a farm by the river. Now it holds five aging cows, and aging humans live and eat in their barn.

Halfway across the pasture, on a knoll, is a small grove of trees. Maples and oaks for the most part, with the occasional birch thrown in for contrast. I pushed the bike along a narrow, brush-choked path into the middle of the grove and put it in the crude lean-to that I had built between two maples. In the middle of the clearing was a fiberglass and wood cradle that cuddled a thirty-six foot, forty-year-old mahogany sailboat. Lacking mast, keel, ballast, and rudder, it sailed the west pasture with aplomb and provided me with a cosy home away from the noisy herd of seniors across the pasture.

At my age I need peace and quiet.

As I dropped through the hatch into the main cabin, the storm hit with full fury. Wind hissed through the trees like an angry viper, and heavy drops of cold rain slashed down from that black sky to pound the boat. I scurried around getting some candles lit, opened the door to the tiny woodstove, threw in some paper, twigs, and

chunks of maple, and blasted the mess with a propane torch for thirty seconds. With a nice fire going, I opened a bottle of Lancer's Rose, filled a heavy white coffee mug I'd liberated from the kitchen awhile back, and sat down in the settee; with two fingers I opened the round, brass-ringed window by my head. A purist might call it a porthole, but I wouldn't invite him in. Immediately a cold breeze brushed my face, and the sound of the thrashing rain filled my head.

I loved it.

Safe in my mahogany cave, with a fire going, the wind and the rain brought on a primordial bliss that makes all the crap worthwhile. I refilled my mug, leaned back, closed my eyes and let the cool wet wind seep into my psyche.

I heard movement. Something large was in the grove stumbling around, breaking branches and crashing through the brush. Too much noise for a deer. Bear? I sat, eyes closed, hand around my mug, and listened as the thing came closer. It entered the clearing, and the noise ceased. Then the thing climbed into the boat and began slapping the top of the hatch.

A visitor. Christ. I heaved myself out of the settee, pushed open the hatch half an inch, and said, "Yes?"

"Yes? What kind of greeting is that on this kind of night? Yes? Lord, but you're a rude one, Harry, now let me in before I drown."

It was tempting to slam the hatch and lock it. But I pushed the thing open, and Mildred Beedy clumped down the four steps into the cabin and stood like a park statue waiting for a pigeon while large amounts of water ran off her raincoat and onto my cabin floor. Mildred is a small, lean creature with large, predatory blue eyes and a magnificent roman nose. She wore some sort of pink rain outfit that looked like it had been bought at a Ben Franklin's after-Christmas sale in 1956.

While the lightning flashed and the thunder boomed we stared at each other. Mildred and I have known each other for five or six years now, but it's a casual relationship, due primarily to the fact that we both happen to live on the farm, and I couldn't imagine what the hell would bring her to my boat in a raging storm. Finally she shook herself, unbuttoned the raincoat, let it drop on the floor, and said, "If that's wine I smell on your breath, Harry, I'll have some."

I got us into the settee, and as I poured her a mug of Lancer's I said, "Didn't I hear you strum your mouth at supper a couple

of months ago on the evils of drink?"

"Annie is a dear woman and I love her, but to put a half gallon bottle of wine at every table at supper is a bit much. It encourages people to drink who shouldn't."

"And you're the judge of who should and who shouldn't," I said.

Mildred slurped down some wine and topped off her mug like someone who knew her way around a bottle. Her limp, wet, gray hair clung to her narrow head like seaweed on a rock, and the cheap red sweater she wore was soggy. She ignored my little dig and said, "Lucy Krebs was murdered."

I stared at her a moment, then said, "Unlikely."

"You know those old stairs that come off the barn? In the back, near the shed?"

"Yes, they come down from that little room Annie used as an office when she was a vet."

Mildred nodded. "Well, Lucy used those stairs all the time, it was a quick way to her trailer. This afternoon she spent some time in the lounge, then left. She went through that little room, opened the door, and stepped out on the stairs." Mildred poured herself more wine. "She stepped out on the stairs, and the whole shebang came down, made a hell, a heck of a

racket. Everyone rushed out to see, and we found poor dear Lucy under a pile of wood with her neck broken."

"All right," I said, "she broke her neck in a fall. Calling it murder is a bit much, don't you think?"

She leaned forward and glared at me with bright cruel eyes. "Ed Stafford went over those stairs just last May, after the snow melted. He says they were sound. I believe him. But you wouldn't know about all that, living out here in this, this *wood tunnel*."

She emptied her mug, burped gently, slid out of the settee, and stood up. She fussed with her dime store raingear for a moment, turned, and said, "Well, come on."

"Come on?" I said, "Come on where?"

"Supper is going to be served late this evening on account of Lucy. If we hurry we can make it."

The rain hammered the deck just above my head, and flashes of lightning lit up the grove, followed by hard shocks of thunder. I laughed and said, "Mildred, I have no intention of leaving the boat to have supper at the barn. What the hell is the matter with you?"

She buttoned up that ridiculous raincoat, pulled and tugged at it until she was satisfied,

then looked at me as if I were a specimen in the morgue. "Lucy Krebs, my dear friend Lucy Krebs, was murdered this afternoon. I want you to help me find out who did it. I want you to catch the individual who killed my friend and rid the farm of that vermin."

I have a spiffy, leading-edge Gor-Tex rainsuit tucked in the left pannier of my bike, but from experience I knew that if I used it for going to the barn and back it would stay in the boat and I'd have a wet ride someday. So I pulled on an ancient cape-type thing and slid the hood over my head. Mildred also had a huge black umbrella.

Bumping shoulders, slipping and sliding on the tall, wet grass, we traipsed out of the grove and across the pasture, our flashlight beams acting as minesweepers, allowing us to avoid the wet piles of dung left by the farm's cows. At the gate I stuffed my light in a pocket, let Mildred through, locked the gate again, and headed for the barn. I led us the long way, around the back of the barn. I wanted to see the scene of Lucy's death, to make it real and less abstract in my mind. We rounded the corner and jerked to a stop. Mildred grabbed my arm and hissed, "Look, look, who's that?"

Amidst the wreckage of the

fallen stairs I saw the dim outline of someone. That someone's arm was rising and falling like a demented butcher chopping meat. With Mildred gripping my arm in an iron grasp, I took several careful steps forward, brushing against the slick, rough boards of the barn with my left side. The dark figure continued to pound away at some part of the fallen stairs. I began to wonder just what the hell I was going to do when I confronted him. I am not and never have been a swashbuckler, ready to leap into danger at a moment's notice.

Then I stepped on an old Coke can. The crackling of the thin aluminum brought the person up straight. In one fluid movement he turned, made us, threw something, and ran. I focused on the thing he threw. A barely perceived shadow; it flew at us fast and silently. I grabbed a handful of Mildred and dropped to the ground.

The thing thudded into the mud behind us, and when I looked up, the person was gone. Mildred walked through the mud, stooped and sloshed back to me, and held out a hammer. I took it, felt its weight, and went to the wrecked stairs. Turning on my flashlight, I started shining it about the jumbled, broken pile of wood.

The small platform at the top

of the stairs had been anchored to the barn by eight long, thick bolts. Five of the bolts, rusted and shiny in the wet, protruded several inches through the wood of the support beams of the platform. The other three bolts stuck out the opposite way, barely two inches into the beam. I squatted down and examined the wood around the heads of the bolts flush with the beam. The old wood appeared dimpled and splintered around the bolt heads, and the heads themselves bore fresh marks. I stood up, brushed the slop from my knees, and said, "Whoever it was, they were hammering the support bolts back into place the way they would have been if the stairs had fallen accidentally. Apparently all that was holding the stairs up was rust and maybe a nail or two."

Mildred looked at me, rivulets of rain flowing along the seams of her narrow, pinched face. She gave me a small tight grin. "So, Harry, what do you think now?"

I wiped water from my face, smiled, and said, "Well, it seems to put a little meat on your theory."

We walked around the barn, opened a small door built into a huge sliding door, and entered a room used for storage by the residents.


Destitute they might be, but no matter how convoluted the

route to the farm, most of them managed to arrive with more than the clothes on their backs. That was fine with me, for almost everyone brought an exercise device or two with them, and now there is a well-equipped gym in a room at the other end of the barn. I spend a lot of time in that room feeding my exercise habit.

With Mildred on my arm, I climbed a set of unpainted, hard pine stairs to the second floor. As we entered the lounge I said, "Check everyone. Note who's wet and muddy. Most of these people walked through wet grass and gravel to get here, not mud, so if anyone's muddy, take names and kick butt." Mildred gave me a disgusted look, nodded twice, and let go of my arm.

"Also," I said, "note who's not here, and who doesn't show up." Like a soldier marching off to battle she left me and started mingling with the thirty or so residents hanging around the buffet.

The front of the barn was converted to a large lounge and dining area some years ago, before I took up residence in the boat. Along the front wall were two huge commercial stoves, in front of them a line of mismatched serving tables. Next was a motley collection of dining tables, mostly the folding kind, and a truly eccentric col-



lection of folding chairs. The rest of the enormous room was occupied by several islands of living room furniture. Each island had a couch, chairs, coffee table, and rug. Built against the side wall, opposite the stairs, was a large stone fireplace.

I shucked out of my raingear, left it dripping on a hook, and, hands in pockets, ambled over to the serving line. Picking up a heavy, chipped plate, I shuffled along behind a pink-haired crone wearing a purple dress and about twenty pounds of costume jewelry. I took some mixed veggies and three pieces of baked chicken and ignored the cake and pies at the end of the line.

Where to sit? Always a problem with me, as I have a low tolerance for yakking and that is what everyone around here seems to excel at. Plate in hand, I scanned the crowd, saw Mildred at a table with six others chatting away, then saw Annie sitting alone at a small table by the fireplace. I ambled over and plunked plate and self down opposite the mayor of our little village.

Annie is a small, tough, no-nonsense woman with deep brown eyes that are always gauging, always questioning. She has the instincts of a ferret and talks out of the side of her mouth like a movie gangster

from the twenties. She showed me a no-lipped smile and said, "Joining the common types for a bit of sup, Harry? Run out of PowerBars and supplements?"

Annie's also into sarcasm.

I poured a glass of wine from the big bottle in the middle of the table, tasted, and considered clutching my throat, gagging, and dropping to the floor. But I knew the gig would be wasted on Annie and the surrounding citizens would simply stare, so I said, "Nice vintage—yesterday's?"

That got me a gimlet eye and a short lecture. "You know wine is a very popular beverage at supper, and I buy a lot of it to keep everyone happy, if not a bit looped, especially on a night such as this. For most it does no harm. You want vintage, you buy it."

"Speaking of happy," I said, "I have a story to light up your evening." I downed half my wine, gently set the glass on the table, and told Annie of my adventures with Mildred. When I was finished, it was her turn to gulp wine.

She glared at me a moment, sighed, shook her head, and said, "Jesus. Thank you for sharing that with me, Harry."

"It was the least I could do," I said.

Then she pointed her fork at me and said, "Catch him, and

soon. I don't want some psychopath using my farm as a killing ground."

I wrapped my chicken up in a red cloth napkin, stuffed it into my sweatjacket pocket, and stood up, full glass in hand. "That old office of yours always unlocked?" I asked.

"Yes, it is," she said. "And it would be my suggestion that you do not attempt to use the outside stairs."

Glass still in hand, I walked through the lounge and out a small unpainted plywood door into a long hallway lined with doors on each side. The doors led into tiny efficiencies. Everything was built out of unpainted plywood. At the end of the hall was an open area, and to the left a small room poorly built from barnboards.

I went to the room, opened the door, and pushed it gently inward. After a slight hesitation I entered, flashlight in hand. Annie's old office was a small square room, with white walls and an ancient rolltop desk that any antique dealer would sell his virgin child for. Directly across from the hall door was a high narrow door made from two wide, thick oak planks strapped together with strips of varnished pine.


I unlatched the outside door, pulled it open, and got pelted by waves of icy, wind-driven rain. I

fumbled around, got the door shut, latched it, and smiled as I wiped my face with the sleeve of my sweatshirt. Perhaps later I'd get a victim's perspective, weather permitting.

Kneeling down, I guided the light over the floorboards and saw that the board that ran closest to the outside wall was slightly raised and two of the nails bore fresh scars. For the hell of it I pushed my fingers into the small gap between the boards and lifted. The nails held air, and the board came up easily. I slid it out of my way and aimed the light into the long, narrow gap. I saw the backside of the first-floor ceiling boards, a foot or so of two thick support beams, and a lot of mouse droppings.

Lined up in a neat row in the exact center of a ceiling board were eight rust-worn nuts. I picked one up. Its outside surface was badly marred and slippery with some kind of oil, most likely penetrating oil used to loosen rusted bolts and nuts. I put the nut back in line, replaced the board, and stood up.

At the coat rack I retrieved my raingear, and as I was shrugging into it, Mildred came up and handed me a white cloth napkin. "No one that ate here tonight was muddy. Wet, yes; muddy, no." She jabbed my hand with the point of a finger-



nail. "These are the residents who didn't show up for tonight's supper. All of them. I leave it to you to sort them out."

"Why me, Mildred? Why didn't you pick on someone else?"

She tilted her head to one side, gave me a mild, curious look like she might be observing some critter in a zoo, and said, "You're a pagan and you drink, but you also exercise a great deal and that points to an individual who persists. You don't care what other people think of you, and that indicates you'll tread where others might not. Goodnight, Harry."

For the second time that night I settled into the settee. I filled my mug and gnawed on a cold chicken breast. The boat was drafty, and subtle breezes nudged the candle flames into spastic dances, causing fuzzy-edged shadows to waltz around my mahogany cave. I put the chicken bones into a bag and put the bag in the freezer of my little gas-powered refrigerator.

After refilling my mug with Lancer's I took Mildred's napkin out of my pocket, carefully unfolded it, and laid it on the table. The napkin was pockmarked with water spots, and along one edge was a garish lipstick smear of some color Mother Nature would never approve of.

I rewrote the names in my

notebook. I don't think Dirty Harry would approve of my notebook. It's a stack of three by four cards wired together between stiff plastic covers. The top cover is bright yellow and has a picture of Winnie-the-Pooh on it.

I topped off the mug, closed my eyes, and listened to the rain drum on the cabin roof. Rain on a roof. Truly one of the most pleasant sounds that exists on this planet. I sat, eyes closed, head against the back of the bench seat, and let the sound of the rain fill my mind.

A long march of distant thunder woke me up. I eased out of my slouch, put my forearms on the table, and stared at the list of names in my notebook.

Seven names. I sipped a bit of Lancer's, belched, and stared hard at the list. If one of these was a killer, it wasn't Emma Kane or Roger Lindsey. Both were in their eighties, slightly daft, and needed help getting around. I crossed them off with a dramatic slash of my Bic and felt a bit smug. Probably why I wrote their names in the notebook in the first place, so I could cross them off and feel good about making some progress. The others I didn't know well enough to make a judgment.

I blew out the candles and lamp and went up on deck. I sat in the port seat under a much

repaired fabric top that was more duct tape than fabric and stared into the black night. I tried for profound thought, or even a little existential melancholy, but all I got was a little wet, a little cold, and a little sad because Lucy Krebs had died. And died not because of accident or disease but because someone had deliberately ended her life for her.

I went back below, rebuilt the fire, and tried to read one of the history magazines I subscribe to. But I couldn't concentrate, not because of the six or seven mugs of wine I had downed, or because I was now hunting for a killer, but because it had been a long day, what with the storm and everything.

As I was staring into space, seeing nothing, thinking less, a stray image flitted across my brain. I opened my notebook and put a line through Steve Paro's name. Steve, a short round man who smiled often and at inappropriate times, had stepped on a mine somewhere in France during World War II. It sure as hell wasn't him who threw a hammer at us and ran away.

Some fair-sized animal scampered across the deck and down the side of the boat. The wind was dying, and the rain was letting up. I yawned and futzed around getting cleaned up, checked the fire, and finally

crawled into the big V bunk in the forward cabin. I thrashed around a bit getting things just right, then relaxed. I had wanted to think about something but couldn't remember what it was. As I was running down a list of things it might be, I fell asleep.

I sat across from Mildred and held onto my coffee mug with both hands. The table, an ancient round thing with folding legs, seemed to be molting and was wobbly as hell. We were in the middle of the dining area eating breakfast, surrounded by forty other people eating breakfast. Since I ate alone so much, forty people talking and shoveling food into their mouths, usually at the same time, was unpleasant. In fact, forty people doing anything is probably going to be unpleasant. I ignored my toast and eggs and sipped the coffee, which was excellent.

Mildred drew a shaky line through a name on my list and said, "It's not Toby Jones, I found out he's in Concord visiting his son for the week."

"So," I said, "that leaves Margaret Tully, Ed Stafford, and Joseph Bates. Statistically it's Stafford or Bates."

"Perhaps not," Mildred said. "I read an article about women who kill. Granted, quite a number were abused, but quite a

number killed for mercenary reasons."

"Women are mercenary creatures, probably by necessity," I said. Mildred gave me a look that would fry ice. I quickly stood up and said, "Okay, I'll try to chat with each one, see if I can find out anything. Are you going to do the same?"

She looked startled. "Heavens, no. If I'm talking to the guilty party and he, or she, realizes I know that he or she is guilty . . . well, I don't want you to be looking for a double murderer. And don't walk away with that mug, Harry. I counted at least six of our mugs in that vessel you live on. One must be considerate, you know."

I scowled at her and left, taking the mug with me.

Tacked onto the west side of the barn is a garage. It's a long, narrow thing made of plywood, barnboard, sheet tin, and a few logs, and has a big door at each end. I found Ed Stafford in the middle of the garage surrounded by gloom, sitting on the dirt floor looking at the naked rear end of the farm's eleven-year-old Ford pickup. I walked up to the back of the Ford, squatted down, and said, "Good morning, Ed." I tapped the brake drum, which was rusted to hell and didn't look like it could stop much of anything. "What's the prognosis on this thing?"

Ed's a big man, somewhere in his sixties, with thick, drooping shoulders that support a heavy neck and a large square head. He slowly turned and glared at me with stone gray eyes. "If you were thinking of taking a ride in this bag of crap, you thought wrong. In fact, nobody will be driving this piece of crud till next week sometime."

I shrugged and said, "Damn." Like I was all set to jump in the thing and drive to Texas. I watched him work for a bit, then said, "Hell of a thing with Lucy. I keep wondering what she must have thought when those stairs gave way."

Ed laid a big wrench in the dirt and closed his eyes. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft and halting. "Lucy was a good woman. Knew her for only two years, but she was a good woman—and a damn good friend."

I looked at Ed a moment, then gently laid a hand on his shoulder. Large silver tears were running down his cheeks, leaving little wiggly trails on his dusty face. "I'm sorry, Ed. I didn't mean to rub salt in your wound."

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "All right," he said. "It's all right, just that I can't believe it happened. I checked those stairs in May, they were good. Strong. I don't understand what the goddamn

hell happened." I remained with him for a while, my hand on his shoulder. Finally, feeling intensely uncomfortable, I patted his shoulder a couple of times, stood up, and slowly made my way out of the garage.

Mildred lived with two other women in a hulking, ratty looking mobile home that might have been blue at one time. Now it was a bleached-out kaleidoscope of plywood patching and had three major sags that were supported by hunks of wood embedded in cracked, puke-green cement pads.

A thick, blocky woman in her seventies and dressed in blue overalls was working a flat blade shovel, methodically turning the rich earth in front of the trailer. I ambled up to her and said, "Little late to be planting a garden isn't it, Helen?"

Helen smiled and shook her head. "Getting the good earth ready for next year. Come the spring, the Lord Jesus and I will till the soil and bring forth a rich abundance for the people."

"I suspect you'll be doing most of the work."

She stabbed the dirt with her shovel, pointed at the door with her head, and said, "Mildred's inside. And, Harry, Jesus is always working beside us."

I rapped twice, pulled open a warped green plywood door, and yelled, "Mildred?"

"You don't have to shout, Harry, come in, come in and sit."

I entered a small square living room crammed with an assortment of battered furniture and brick and pine bookshelves loaded with videotapes. In the corner was a large brown television with a gray VCR squatting on top of it. I settled into the depths of a huge green easy chair and said, "I'll have a large glass of Lancer's Rose, please."

Mildred snorted and sat back in her lounger. "You'll have a cup of tea. It's in that stone pitcher on the table in front of you."

I've had Mildred's tea before. It's loaded with enough honey to draw bears out of hibernation. So I ignored the tea and told Mildred about Ed Stafford. When I was through with my story, Mildred pursed her lips, looked into the distance a moment, came back to me, and said, "You're sure Edward's grief is genuine?" Then she flapped a hand at me and said, "Yes, of course it is. Edward is a basic individual."

She picked up her teacup, a fragile piece of porcelain etched with gold and memories of another life, took three or four tiny sips, and slowly guided the cup back to its etched gold saucer. "Well, Harry, now I have a bit of news to relate. It seems that Margaret Tully is in the hospi-

tal down in Manchester having hip replacement surgery."

"When did she go?" I asked.

"Three days ago. A cousin picked her up."

I dwelled on the implications of that for maybe thirty seconds and said, "Henry Bates. Isn't he the man who arrived two or three months ago, a tall, fat guy with three or four chins and not much hair, pale, not too healthy looking?"

"Yes, the sheriff brought him. Seems his wife died and left him with enormous medical bills, hers, not his. Everything was seized by creditors, but since he's now living here and gives his Social Security check to the co-op, there's nothing else they can do. He lives in that aluminum thing with Herald Lynch. I've talked to him several times, and he's always distant, like he'll talk to someone but really doesn't care to. I do not like the man." She looked out the window and watched Helen dig for a minute. Then she looked back at me and said, "He has a drinker's face."

The aluminum thing was a thirty foot travel trailer set up on cement blocks. The tires had rotted off, and the aluminum skin was dull, pocked with dents, and deeply creased in several spots. Herald Lynch, a lean, beady-eyed weasel of a man, was sitting on the raw

pine steps drinking beer from a wine bottle when I strolled up. Without a word he held up the bottle. I took it, gave the mouth a ritual swipe, and sucked down about a third of it. Herald makes his own beer, usually a dark ale that still tastes good an hour after you drink it, and I never refuse a swig of the stuff. As I handed the bottle back, I belched softly and said, "Pure heaven as usual, Herald. Your roomie around?"

"He's usually in the lounge reading the paper this time of the day."

I went hmm and asked, "What's he like?"

Herald stared at the bottle in his hand for almost a minute then said quietly, "He's probably a looney tune."

I grinned and said, "Does he drink?"

"No, but I think he'd like to. I think he would very much like to." He looked up at me and smiled. "He eats oranges. Has a big bowl of them on the kitchen counter. Has people pick them up in town for him. Every once in a while, two, three times a day, he'll grab one, fairly rip the peel off, and eat it. Slowly, he'll eat that thing slowly. Then he goes about his business."

I aimed an arm at the door. "Mind if I go in? Look around a bit?"

Lynch had cat eyes. Black

glassy things that said nothing. He glanced at me, looked at his bottle, and said, "Bates comes, I'll slap the side of the trailer twice."

Inside, the trailer was built along the same idea as my boat. Tiny modules for kitchen and bath, a settee, couple of castoff chairs, and two tiny bedrooms. Bates slept in a minuscule cubicle that smelled faintly of Old Spice and old socks. He was a little negligent in tidying up. His sheets and blanket were a tangled heap at the foot of his bed, and he favored piles on the floor instead of the cardboard bureau and a laundry bag.

I found a dented, heavy toolbox under the bed. I dragged it out, pulled up the latches, and opened the lid. I mucked around a bit and found a round piece of steel about eight inches long and a half inch in diameter. One end tapered down to maybe a quarter inch. It was rusty and smelled of penetrating oil. It would be a handy item for punching bolts out of support beams. He also had a big hunting knife in a black leather sheath. I pulled the thing out of the sheath. The blade was speckled with rust and dull as a sheep's wit. After putting everything back I slid the box under the bed. I didn't find a hammer.

When I came out of the camper, Lynch was sitting on the

steps feeding peanuts to a small red squirrel. Without looking up he said, "Find anything?"

"Yes," I said. "Herald, you might want to be a little careful around him."

He put a peanut on the tip of his finger. The little squirrel put one paw on Herald's thumb to steady itself and grabbed the peanut with the other. "I already am," he said.

I found Henry Bates in the lounge, sitting on a faded threadbare sofa that might once have been red. He was reading the comics section of the *Boston Globe* and smoking a cigarette. A bland, pale man with a round, flesh-laden face and dull brown eyes, he ignored me when I sat down in the green lawn chair across from him. Between us was a coffee table made out of hard pine. It had one coat of brown paint and narrow yellow stripes running along the edges. It looked like a fifth grade manual arts project and probably would support an M60 tank. I put my coffee on the table and said, "Would you mind not smoking? It aggravates my asthma." At least I assumed it would if I had asthma.

He slowly raised his head and stared at me. His short, rough-cut hair was about the same color as his face. It was like looking at smoke. As I stared at him, slightly giddy to be in the

presence of a killer, I noticed that his cheeks and nose were webbed with a thick matrix of broken veins, and his eyes had a dull, wet look.

Finally, just as my smile was turning to stone, he jabbed the cigarette hard three times in the large glass ashtray in the middle of the table.

I bounced my head in a nod, went for another smile, and said, "That was a hell of a thing with Lucy Krebs, wasn't it?"

His voice was like the rest of him, a bland, monotonal noise that drifted in the air like dust. "I didn't know the woman too well, just to see her about. Maybe now they'll do something about the hazards around this dump."

"Oh, I don't think the farm is any less safe than the average home," I said. "And it's pleasanter around here than any city is, or even any town."

He looked at me as if I had just suggested sex, picked up a matchbox, opened it, and pulled out several wooden matches. "It's strange," I said. "Her walking out that door like that. I mean what the hell was she doing going out that door in the first place?"

He gave me a quick, hard look, then stared at the matches in his hand. "Wouldn't know. I don't pay much attention to what other folks are doing. Try

to mind my own business. I did hear that she used that stairway all the time."

As he was talking, Henry slowly lined the matches neatly down the exact center of the yellow stripe on his side of the table. After the matches were in a perfect line he kept at them, trying to make the little line even straighter, neater. I stared at the matches lined up so perfectly, picked up my coffee, stood up, and said, "Well, I'll let you get back to your paper and cigarettes." He nodded, slid a Camel cigarette out of his pack, and lit it with a wooden match from the box, leaving the six matches on the yellow stripe lined up with mathematical precision.

Again I was eating supper in the barn. Seated with Mildred at a small table by the living room suite where I had talked with Henry Bates, I poked at a piece of mystery meat, possibly a hunk of roast beef, decided against it, and poured another glass of wine from the bottle in the middle of the table.

Mildred watched me with a gimlet eye. "For an educated man, a teacher yet, you do indulge in some loathsome habits."

"Ex-teacher," I said. "And I have noted that on occasion you hit the grape like a thirsty camel, so don't spew on about other

people's habits—glass houses and all that." I took another gulp and said, "What about Henry Bates?"

Mildred looked left, looked right, and leaned toward me. "Well," she said, "after I cashed my Social Security check and did a little shopping, I still had an hour or so before the van came back to the farm, so I decided to stop in at my hairdresser's even though my appointment isn't until next Monday."

I raised my glass in a toast. "I take it you came up with something?"

"I talked with Emma Koch while she was under the dryer. Emma has, had, known Lucy for years and years. She was devastated to hear of her death. I told her it was an accident, by the way, I did not see the need to stir up the waters."

"Probably a smart move," I said, "but how did you bring Henry into your conversation?"

"I just mentioned that he was now at the farm, having lost everything when his wife died." She leaned closer and hissed. "It seems that Lucy was Henry's landlord for a month, about six years ago, before she went bankrupt and lost her house and the two apartments. It seems Henry is a thief. One time he almost went to jail for stealing another man's checkbook and cashing over two hundred dollars' worth

of checks. This was about ten years ago when he and his wife were running a gas station down in Franklin.

"Then, when he and his wife were renting from Lucy, he tried to steal Lucy's coin collection. Lucy caught him redhanded, in her house, filling a big leather bag with her coins. Lucy is, was, a very moral woman. She ran out of her house to a neighbor's and called the police and had him arrested. It was only after Henry's wife begged her that she relented and asked that the charges be dropped. She evicted the both of them that very day."

I got a few candles lit, poured a mug of Lancer's, and sat in the settee. Although the grove was still and silent, the candle flames danced to some unfelt movement of the air and filled the cabin with restless shadows.

Henry Bates killed Lucy Krebs for revenge.

I sat there wondering what the hell I could do about Henry Bates.

A communal breakfast again. The only things I'd eaten at the boat in the last couple of days had been my vitamins and supplements. The smell of fried meat and potatoes floated in the air like diesel exhaust. But the

coffee was always excellent, and I poured myself two mugs, added a bit of cream, put two pieces of whole wheat toast in my pocket, and looked around for Annie. I saw her at one of the small tables working on a cup of coffee and writing in a ledger.

She looked a bit surprised when I put my coffee on the table and gently lowered myself onto the dented and fragile folding chair. The chair held, so I smiled and said, "Good morning, Annie." I nodded at the ledger. "This ship still afloat?"

She closed the big leather-bound book, gave me a hint of a smile, and said, "Not only are we afloat, but it seems that we are four hundred six dollars and twenty-eight cents in the black. And if you can manage to split another twelve cords for all the stoves, I won't have to spend any of it on fuel."

I must have looked pretty grim because she laughed, grabbed my forearm, and said, "Please, Harry? It would mean a great deal to the co-op."

"I've already cut thirteen, fourteen cords, Annie, what about the other people? Get them out in the woods, for Christ' sake."

"Harry, Ed Stafford or Herald Lynch might be up to it, but the others? Putting a chain saw in their hands would be tanta-

mount to suicide, a very messy suicide."

I sighed dramatically, shook my head, and said, "All right, providing you deliver a bottle of Lancer's Rose out to the boat every third day for a month."

She snorted. "In your dreams, Harry. Now, what's going on with that other matter we discussed?"

So I told her what Mildred and I had found out and what I wanted. She stared at me a moment, opened the ledger, and turned through it for several minutes without really looking at anything. Finally she nodded. "Come to the house after breakfast. It'll be on the living room table." She stood, picked up the big green book, tucked it under her arm, and stared down at me. "I don't think it will work, Harry. I had a long talk with the sheriff and was assured everything was kosher with the man."

I shrugged, pulled a piece of toast out of my sweatjacket pocket, dunked it in the coffee, and took a bite. Annie turned on her heel and left.

I pushed the chair back, stretched out my legs, munched on the toast, and took small sips of coffee. Coffee in the morning, God I love it. I stretched out a bit farther and watched the breakfast crowd. Mildred was across the room talking with two stocky women dressed in

jeans, plaid shirts, and baseball caps. A day in the gardens, I guessed, and the thought of cutting and splitting a dozen more cords of wood flicked against my skull and turned my coffee cold.

Thirty minutes later I was alone in the room. I stood up and walked behind the serving line and through a small solid-core door stained a golden yellow.

Annie's living room is off limits to everyone except by direct invitation, so when I entered, it was empty and quiet. Not a castoff twenty-year-old couch was in sight. Just matching sets of black leather chairs and sofas, two high-backed easy chairs of waxed white leather, and a big golden coffee table hewn from some exotic wood I didn't recognize. If Annie sold just one piece, I would be freed from a week or more of hard work in the woods.

On the coffee table was a white box that used to contain computer software. I picked it up and walked through the house and out the kitchen door.

Herald Lynch opened the door, gave me a look, and stood aside. On the settee table was a large, round, stain-darkened bowl with four oranges in it.

I sat on the the left bench seat of the settee, picked up an orange, and gently squeezed it. "So how goes your life, Herald?" I asked.

Herald slid into the opposite seat, put his forearms on the table, and said, "Harry, I've known you what? Five years now, and you've visited twice, both times in the last couple of days. You and I are not exactly fishing buddies, and frankly, I don't think you much care how my life is going." He gave me a monkey smile and said, "Makes me a little suspicious."


"Bates eaten any oranges today?" I asked.

Herald shook his head. "Nope, usually has one when he comes back from reading the paper and smoking them goddamn cigarettes."

I put the orange back in the bowl, checked my watch, and then told Herald Lynch about Henry Bates.

When I finished, he said, "Lucy Krebs was a fine woman. Always had a good word for ya, always went out of her way to be kind. It's my opinion we should bust his goddamn head in and throw him in the river. It's been raining on and off for a week now, and it'll be high; the body wouldn't wash up for miles."

I almost smiled, then looked closer at Lynch's eyes and realized he was serious. I shook my head and carefully pulled a small box out of my sweatjacket pocket. I opened the lid and with thumb and forefinger lift-



ed the syringe out and held it before Lynch's eyes.

Lynch stared at it. "What's in it?"

"Vodka," I said. "Orange-flavored vodka." I picked up an orange, slid the needle in, and gently pushed the glass plunger, injecting maybe three drops of vodka into the orange. I pulled out the needle, turned the orange, injected another three or four drops, and put the orange back in the bowl. With Lynch leaning close, watching every move, I injected each orange with seven or eight drops of orange vodka and returned it to the bowl.

When I was done, we leaned back and looked at each other. "I think he'll know," Lynch said. "You ever tasted that stuff?"

I nodded. "Tried some when I filled the syringe, tasted like sugared lighter fluid. I also ate an orange this morning in the lounge. It was pretty tart." I pointed at the bowl, now loaded with My Oranges, and said, "By doing this I may be causing you a problem or two, problems not of your choosing."

Lynch smiled and said, "Hell, Harry, the reason I'm here in this beatup trailer, with thirty dollars left for the month, and fourteen bottles of homemade beer in the refrigerator, is because of problems not of my choosing."

Every day Henry Bates ate two or three oranges. Every day I, with Lynch watching, injected several drops of vodka into Bates's oranges. I spent reluctant hours eating in the barn and watching. Usually I sat alone. On one occasion I sat with Mildred and endured. I hadn't told Mildred what I was doing, just that I was up to no good and that she would see results sometime soon and to stop badgering me.

On the sixth day, as I was injecting an orange, Lynch leaned close and said, "Bates ate three oranges yesterday morning, one right after the other, right after he came back from the lounge. He was antsy, pacing up and down, going outside, coming back in, like a restless cat." Herald touched me on the shoulder, and I looked up at him, my syringe at the ready. "At noon he helped himself to one of my beers, drank it down in five minutes."

That night at supper I sat with Mildred at a small round table with two by fours for legs. Baked chicken was the main course, and I loaded my plate with an assortment of legs, thighs, and wings. "Meat and wine," Mildred said. "I really don't think that's a healthy meal. I thought you were so health conscious, Harry."

I went hmm and continued

eating and watching. Four tables away, Henry Bates was seated with three other residents. They looked uncomfortable. Bates was doing all the talking. His face was shiny with sweat, and he waved his right arm around like he was directing traffic at Daytona.

And he wasn't eating. There was a half-empty glass of wine in front of him, and as I watched, he downed it and refilled the glass. I wrapped the rest of my chicken in a yellow cloth napkin with "The Main Street Diner" stitched in red along one edge and shoved it in my pocket. I refilled my glass, stood up, and said, "I'll see you later, Mildred, and when I do, I might have something to report."

"Harry, for God's sake, will you please return all the dinnerware you've stolen from here?"

I was leaning against the end of Henry's trailer when he came stumbling out of the dark. I stepped out of the shadow into the circle of light given off by the feeble yard light, toasted Henry with my still full glass, and said, "Good evening, Henry, are you enjoying your life?"

Henry stopped, weaved around a bit, got himself steady, and stared at me the way a drunk will do. Finally he mumbled, "Hey, one of the best days of my life." He wiped his fore-

head and leaned toward me. "Oh, it's you, the guy who doesn't like cigarettes." He dragged a pack of Camels out of his shirt pocket, jammed one in his mouth, and lit it with a two inch flame from a Bic lighter. The flame lit up his pale, flabby face, making the dense network of broken veins on his nose and cheeks look almost fluorescent. He took a deep drag, blew a long stream of smoke into the night, and pointed the glowing tip of the thing at me. "My own front yard, can do anything I want." He smiled at me, took another deep drag, and sent a stream of smoke over my right shoulder. I held out my glass and said, "I can't drink any more, you want this?"

He stared at it, smiled again, and said, "Always take a drink, foolish not to." I put the glass into his dead-steady outstretched hand. He brought the glass close to his chest, caressed it, and downed the wine in two noisy gulps. Then he looked at me, smiled like an abused child, threw the glass into the weeds to his left, smiled that sad smile again, and said, "Thanks, you're a good man. Goodnight, good man." Henry Bates walked into the aluminum camper, and I walked back to my grove and my boat.

*

“Would you mind not smoking? It bothers my asthma.”

Bates lifted his eyes from the *Boston Globe* and glared at me. Then he made a minor drama out of looking around the room. There were two other people in the lounge talking quietly by the fireplace. Bates turned back to me. “The place isn’t exactly packed, go to another chair. I want to smoke. I sure as hell don’t wanna be annoyed.”

According to Lynch, Bates had three beers in him and probably some wine. He thought Bates had a bottle stashed out in the weeds behind the camper. I leaned toward him, clasped my trembling hands together, gave him my best hard-ass look, which might intimidate a naive puppy, and said, “Bates, I know you killed Lucy Krebs. You knew she always used those stairs, that she was the only one who did so. So you took the nuts off the support bolts and used a punch to knock the bolts out of the support timber. That staircase was like a mine waiting for its victim. It was me who surprised you that night, when you were trying to hammer the bolts back in. I have your hammer and tomorrow it and I are going to the police. When they hear how you used to rent from Lucy and got caught trying to steal her coin collection, I’m sure they will be very interested in you.”

I lurched to my feet and managed to find my way out of the lounge. At the bottom of the stairs I stopped, took three or four deep breaths, jammed my hands in my sweatjacket pockets, and left the barn.

When Bates came out of the barn, I was watching from the shadows in the corner of Annie’s porch. Bates, head bent, hands clenched, tromped across the barnyard and into the field toward the aluminum camper. Three minutes later the screen door banged open, and he charged out, stuffing oranges into his pants pockets as he came. Strapped to his waist was the big hunting knife. Bates double-timed around to the back of the camper and came back minutes later wiping his mouth. He stood in the middle of the barnyard, his fists bunched, his head swiveling back and forth like a drunk watching a slow motion tennis match.

I came out of the shadow and slowly walked the length of the house and barn. With a bit of fumbling I got the damn gate open and strolled into the pasture. I headed away from the grove and toward the river. It was a bright, cold morning, one of those sharp fall days that warn of impending winter.

When I was about fifty feet from the river, I turned and walked parallel to it, being care-

ful to walk normally. It was hard to do. My knees felt weak, and it took every bit of concentration I had to keep from turning and looking back. My goal was a line of dead trees less than a hundred yards ahead of me. When the river changed course twenty years ago, it inundated several acres of trees, slowly killing them and creating a dense brooding marsh.

The terrain was changing, becoming less solid as I neared the marsh, and I was having to watch where I stepped. Pools of cold, dark water lay about like dropped pennies, and shallow, sand-clogged creeks were as numerous as veins on a body-builder's arms.

I reached the tree line, walked several yards into the woods, spun around, and looked back.

Bates was about thirty yards away, slogging through the marsh, coming straight at me. I went deeper into the marsh, leaned against a long-dead maple, and waited. Bates marched into the trees and stopped. He swung his head back and forth, searching. Twice his eyes passed over me and kept going. Despite the cold his face was shiny, and his denim shirt was stained with large patches of sweat. His tan slacks were soaked to the knee.

He fumbled an orange from his pants pocket, dropped it,

bent down and scooped it out of the mud, ripped it in half, and gnawed at it like a hungry rat.

I stooped, picked up a twisted, water-blackened piece of wood, and whacked it lightly, twice, against the tree. Bates whirled around, saw me, pulled the knife from his belt, and lurched toward me. At a half trot I headed deeper into the marsh, avoiding the muck and trying to stay on semi-solid ground.

I didn't want to get too far ahead or let him get too close. But it was hard because I had no way to gauge his condition.

This morning, instead of vodka, I had injected several drops of a powerful hog tranquilizer into Bates's oranges.

I squatted on a small, mushy plot of sand and mud and waited thirty minutes. Despite the sweatjacket I was shivering. Bates was no longer after me. Either I had gotten too far ahead or he had given up. I briefly considered backtracking, finding him, and renewing the chase, but enough is enough. I didn't have what it took to continue. I spent the next hour getting out of the marsh and back to the farm.

That night I went to the barn, sat with Annie, and forced myself to eat half a plate of spaghetti and a dish of homemade applesauce. Avoiding the wine

took massive effort, but I managed it.

Henry Bates didn't show up for supper.

I spent the night in the boat sitting on the floor facing the hatch, wrapped in a wool army blanket, my hand around a thirty-year-old Iver Johnson .22 revolver.

Henry Bates didn't show.

Lynch was sitting on the steps of the aluminum camper nuzzling a beer when I turned up. He looked at me briefly and held up the bottle. I took it, gave the mouth a wipe, and drank. As I handed the beer back to Lynch, he said, "He didn't come home last night."

"I'll tell Annie, tell her we have a missing person."

Lynch shook his head. "Let's wait until after lunch, he might still show up."

An hour after lunch I went looking for Annie and found her in the big shed putting some sort of salve into the right eye of a huge Guernsey. She finished, cooed to the beast for a bit, then slapped it on the rump. The cow backed away, gave me a baleful look, and trotted off to join her sisters.

Annie smiled and said, "I love those girls. They are getting old and cranky like the rest of us, but they deserve the best—like the rest of us. Now, Harry, what tales do you have to tell?"

"Henry Bates seems to be missing. No one has seen him since yesterday morning."

The shed was dark and quiet and thick with the smell of cows and hay. We stared at each other. Then Annie pursed her lips and nodded. "Yes, well, I shall inform the police."

We gathered in small, tight clumps around the gate and watched the rescue squad bring Henry Bates out of the marsh. Dressed in blue jumpsuits festooned with white and red patches and an American flag, faces carefully grim, eyes hidden behind sixty dollar sunglasses, they marched out of the pasture like blue robots, toting Henry in a shiny aluminum stretcher. I stared at him as he floated by me. Gray as an old shirt, oxygen tube up his nose, his large, lumpy body wrapped in green blankets, he looked surreal, like a cleverly made lifesized doll.

With much shouting and waving of arms they got him into the rescue truck. Then everyone clambered aboard, sirens howled, lights flashed, and Henry Bates left the farm.

Annie and a short skinny cop in a badly pressed blue uniform stood in the middle of the now empty barnyard talking. Annie, her arms folded across her narrow chest, nodded a lot and repeatedly dragged her left foot in

the sparse gravel. Finally the cop touched the brim of his cap and climbed into his cruiser. He drove away slowly, no lights, no siren. Annie watched him go, glanced at me, and went into the house.

Mildred and I were sitting at a large table near the fireplace, which was toasting several of my logs and filling the room with the smell of burning birch. I was eating what I dearly hoped would be my last group meal until spring and drinking the cheap wine from a white plastic cup with a picture of some rabbit on it. Mildred was quiet, picking at her meal like a cautious hen. She hadn't asked, and I hadn't told.

Annie put her glass on the table and sat down. She filled her glass with wine, drank about half, and filled it again. Then she looked at us and said, "Good evening, Mildred, Harry. You two don't seem to be hungry tonight."

"Spaghetti again," I said.

"Yes, well, you have my sympathy. Now I have an announcement. I thought you two should be the first to know. About thirty minutes ago, Henry Bates died. He died of exposure. The doctor told me they did everything they could, but his age and the fact that he had been drink-

ing proved to be a lethal combination. They said that he must have had a few drinks, decided to go for a walk, and got lost in the marsh. It was quite cold last night.

"I got hold of his nephew, and there will be a memorial service next Monday at two o'clock if anyone cares to go." Annie stood up, looked at Mildred, looked at me, touched me briefly on the shoulder, and walked away.

I stood up. Mildred quickly did the same, walked around the table, and embraced me. I held her awkwardly for a moment, then gently pushed her away. Tears were streaming down her weathered face. While patting me on the chest with the flat of her hand, she nodded several times to herself, then turned and headed for the door.

I sat slumped in the settee with the window open listening to the soft rain as it pattered on the boat. Some critter, possibly a raccoon, was exploring the clearing, making little mewing, snuffling noises as it wandered about. With effort I straightened up and refilled my mug, then slouched down again. A stiff breeze hissed through the trees, and it began to rain harder.

My kind of night.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

The late afternoon sun was beaming boldly through the west window and across the office floor, creeping up the far wall. Captain Kaplan of the Halifax Police Department didn't bother to get up to lower the blinds. He was worried, more than usual.

"Sergeant," he said, "it's the boldest bit of skulduggery in all my experience. To sum up, this lone bandit holds up the Nova Scotia Provincial Bank at rush hour. He not only demands and gets \$125,000 from the teller, but he takes the time to rob all the customers of their watches, rings, and money."

"And the burglar alarm, sir!" said Sergeant Largent.

"Yes, all wires cut. This fellow knew his business. Then he makes his getaway in a stolen car—the mayor's own Cadillac."

"We found Mayor Thayer's car, sir," the sergeant reminded his superior. "Abandoned near the docks. Always a busy place down there. I asked around with the usual results—nobody noticed anything."

"I know, I know," snorted Captain Kaplan. "I'm afraid we don't have much of a chance of catching *this* criminal."

"Wel-l-ll, sir," said Largent hesitantly, "I wouldn't put it quite that way. I got a lead from our friend Willie Wheeler—"

"Wheeler the Squealer?" interrupted the man behind the desk. "He's been pretty reliable. What does he say—other than wanting a reward?"

"Willie says that in a bar this noon he overheard some guy in seaman's garb bragging that he would pull a 'big one' and that he would make his getaway the following morning on a ship. The guy claimed that of all the ships in port his would reach its destination first."

"Sergeant, I think we'd better get down to the docks immediately and find out what ships are sailing in the morning."

The wharf was in total confusion.

"What's going on?" Kaplan asked the harbormaster:

"Five ships rushing a deadline," answered the latter quickly. "All scheduled to sail at dawn tomorrow. The shippers are in a dither, and the captains of the five ships are pushing the stevedores to the limit. I've got to go now. There seems to be something wrong with the crane loading the *Seadog*."

As he rushed off, the two members of the Halifax police department wandered down to where the *Seadog* was anchored and began asking questions, picking up odd bits of information.

(1) The destinations of the five ships are over 100 miles apart, ranging from 800 miles for the vessel of Captain LaMer to 1200 for the cargo of ore.

(2) Coal, fish, and grain are the products being shipped by Andy, Mr. Gavin, and the shipper entrusting his goods to Captain Mack (who does not command the *Parrot*).

(3) The *Parrot*, *Queen*, and *Ram* include the ship of Captain O'Hara (who is not transporting the shipment of Mr. Fuller), the ship loading Cal's product, and the one loading the machinery.

(4) Cal, Dan, and Ed are the shippers who include Mr. Jacoby, the one trusting his goods to Captain Kelly, and the one whose shipment is scheduled to travel 1100 miles (but not on the *Tiger*).

(5) Mr. Fuller, Mr. Hagar, and Mr. Ickes include Dan (whose product is not scheduled to go 900 miles), the man whose product is being loaded aboard the *Queen*, and the man shipping grain. They are not using either the slowest of the five ships (which makes 275 miles a day) or the fastest (which makes 425 miles a day).

(6) Captains Kelly, LaMer, and Nero are engaged by Bob, by Mr. Hagar (who is not shipping his goods 1000 miles), and by the man shipping ore.

(7) Neither Andy nor Mr. Hagar has entrusted his products to the *Parrot* (although it is not the slowest of the five ships) or to the ship scheduled to go at a rate of 400 miles a day (which is not carrying the cargo of fish).

(8) Mr. Hagar's product will not travel at 350 miles per day; it

will proceed 50 miles a day slower than the cargo aboard the *Ram*.

"I think I've heard enough, sir," declared Sergeant Largent.

Police captain Kaplan smiled. "So have I. Let's act."

He strolled over to the captain of one of the ships. "Sir," he said, "we have reason to believe that a member of your crew robbed the Nova Scotia Provincial Bank today. Your ship is quarantined until we have searched it—thoroughly."

The entire amount of the loot was discovered in a footlocker aboard that particular ship.

Which ship would be the first to reach its destination if all five steamed out at dawn? Yes, that is the one where the stolen money was found.

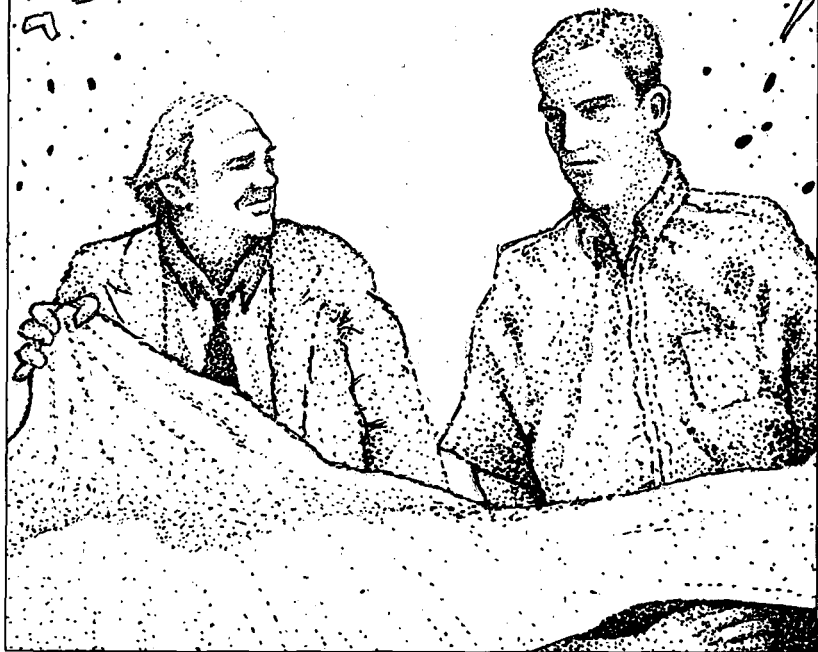
SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Bessy, the wife of old Clem Tuttle on the fifth floor, shot young Elmer Sipple on the top floor with her husband's rifle.

FLOOR	HUSBAND	WIFE	AGE	WEAPON
6	Elmer Sipple	Doris	young	pistol
5	Clem Tuttle	Bessy	old	rifle
4	Andy Ruddell	Flora	young	rifle
3	Fred Sipple	Clara	old	shotgun
2	Bart Ruddell	Alice	old	shotgun
1	Dick Tuttle	Edith	young	pistol

DOTTY BLUE

William Beechcroft



Bizzibee turned out to be a nice looking little town. It straddled both sides of a state road that angled off U.S. 25, the highway that parallels the east side of the Rockies from New Mexico to Wyoming.

The town was two blocks of mostly ma-and-pa commercial

enterprise, a rustic lodge named The Mountaineer, then a string of decent enough houses. In front of one of them hung a shingle: F. X. GOSLING, M.D., COUNTY CORONER. That was what I was looking for.

I was here not because F. X. Gosling was the local coroner or because he was an M.D. I was

here because Dr. Gosling had been a high school classmate of mine back in Philadelphia. He went on to Johns Hopkins Medical School. I joined the U.S. Marines. By the time I'd served my hitch and joined the Philly PD, Gosling had a general practice going, and I signed on as a patient. No big problems other than too much weight as time wore on.

Eventually I quit the force, set up shop as a P.I. Put on more weight, though when you're just shy of six feet, it doesn't show all that much. Then came the Gosling case, after which Doc Gosling and I parted company.

All this flashed through my sun-dazzled brain as I pulled my travel-worn Bronco into his graveled, semicircular driveway. An adobe wall screened the entrance from the highway. I supposed it was there to protect the sensibilities of neighbors and passing motorists when bodies were delivered here for Gosling's autopsical findings.

I pushed the doorbell, heard a muffled chime, and waited. The house was wide and low, rough tan stucco, the oak door extra wide—for gurneys, I supposed.

I ran a quick gamut of mixed feelings. He had been a high school buddy, my doctor for decades, then he'd turned cold and mean when I found his wife was making appointments of her

own. Notably housecalls on quiet afternoons with a suave Dr. Finley. Gosling had hired me to check her out, then cut me dead when I turned in my report. Still, he once had been a friend—and we were a long way from Pennsylvania out here at the foot of the looming Rockies.

The latch rattled, and the big door swung open. Dr. Francis Xavier Gosling, once known as "Goose," later as "Doc," stood there, a rotund balding double for Guy Kibbee of old-movie fame.

"Yes?" Doc Gosling said. "Can I be of—" He squinted, peered up at me. "Well, I'll be a monkey's grandfather! Rod Montgomery!"

I couldn't read his reaction. "I was in the neighborhood," I said. Somewhat true, except that the neighborhood had been a vacation stop in Albuquerque, and this was a multi-hundred-mile side trip.

"I can't believe this." Doc's sandy brows were at high surprise. "You. Out here."

"Same thought I have about you," I told him.

"Simple enough. After Melba and I . . . split, I came out here to visit my daughter. She manages the Mountaineer lodge. I liked it here. Stayed here. Bought this place, sent for my furniture. Got myself elected coroner."



"Didn't know you were a forensics man."

"I read a lot." Doc suddenly slapped his forehead. "Why are we standing out here in the heat? Come on in, Rod."

"I gather I'm forgiven?"

"For what?" he said over his shoulder as I followed him into air-conditioned coolness.

"The case."

"The case? Oh. The Melba business. I acted like an ass, Rod. Hired you to get the goods on her, then hated you when you did your job. Shameful example of killing the messenger. Sit." He curled his thumb toward a pretty darned ugly overstuffed chair. "Take a ginger beer or something stronger?"

"Ginger beer's fine."

While Doc clanked around in the adjacent kitchen, I took in the strange decor of the big main room. Tan stucco walls in here, too. Philadelphia 1950's furniture in a Mexican hacienda. Across the entrance hall were a pair of metal swinging doors.

"That's my little morgue," Doc said behind me. He held out a frosty glass of pale ginger beer. I sank back in the chunky chair.

"I've made a discovery, Rod," Doc said from the mushy-looking sofa. "There's a lot less anxiety when your patients arrive already dead."

"You get much, uh, action?"

"Accidents and heatstroke." He grinned. "Cut and dried, you might say. Now and then something more interesting turns up. Got one in there now."

"Other than cut or dried?"

"This one's broken. Care to take a look?"

Well, that was a novel offer, but I wasn't so sure I wanted to take him up on it this peaceful Western afternoon.

"Broken?" I said.

"Neck. Purportedly in a fall. Too bad. Can't be more than thirty-five or so. Something about it bugs me. Come on, I'll show you."

How could I refuse?

Doc's morgue was a stark white room, its own A/C seemingly set on freeze-dry. At the far end was a cluttered lab set-up. Two steel tables graced the middle of this unappealing chamber. On one of them lay a sheet-shrouded body.

Without preamble Doc Gosling folded back the sheet at the head end. "Meet the late Dorothy Blumentripp, local artist, found dead yesterday afternoon in her own studio. Broken neck, apparently from an accidental fall."

"Fell how?"

"She seemed to have tangled her feet in an extension cord and took a header down the step into her sunken studio."

"Sunken studio?"



"Originally a sunken living room. Quite the architectural fad when her house was built. She'd converted the room into an at-home art studio."

"So Blumentripp tripped."

"So Chief Dixon deduced. And so he has officially reported."

I peered down at the mortal remains of Ms. Blumentripp. Quite pretty. Gracefully arched eyebrows, stubby little nose, full mouth. No makeup. Gray complexion, but she was dead. Shoulder-length blonde hair, lots of it.

"So what bugs you, Doc?"

He fingered the hair aside at the nape of her neck. "See those bruises? What kind of fall gives you bruises like that?"

"You think she was strangled?"

"No, Rod. Her neck has been snapped."

"You think this might be a case of murder?"

Doc nodded thoughtfully.

"But?" I prompted.

"No motive, no suspects. Dixon likes a lot to go on, not just a few suspicious bruises."

I looked down at Doc Gosling's current patient. I had no particular place I had to be next. Had as much time as God was willing to give me.

"I'm kind of partial to suspicious bruises, myself," I told him.

Doc gave me a big smile. "I was hoping you would be."

"But I'm two thousand miles out of my area of license."

"You want to play, I'll call you my special consultant."

"Fair enough." I gestured toward the supine Ms. Blumentripp. "Now that I'm on the case, what else can you tell me?"

Doc leaned against the empty autopsy table. "Federal Parcel Service driver found her around four P.M. yesterday when he made a delivery to her place. Chief Dixon called me, and I got there about five. Figured the time of death was about noon, give or take an hour or so. It's an inexact calculation, you know. Too many variables."

"Anybody else seen around her place yesterday?"

"The gardener. He was working in the back lawn most of the day. Said he didn't see anybody at all. Woman across the street did, though. Maude Ruddy. She's got an older house with a front porch. Spends her day on it, sitting and knitting. She told Dixon that the deceased had a visitor around lunchtime. Maude knew who he was, too."

"You going to tantalize me or tell me?"

"Fellow by the name of Trimbull. The deceased's ex-husband. They broke up about a year back."

“Two callers, then. Ex-hubby and the parcel man. That’s it?”

“So Maude told the chief.”

I nodded at the body. “How’d you find her?”

“On the studio floor, flat on her face. Feet were up on the little step I mentioned, and an extension cord from a lamp was looped around the left one.” Doc shrugged. “Looked like an obvious accident—until I spotted the neck bruises.”

“Forensically speaking, Doc, you got anything else?”

“So speaking, I have this.” He walked over to the lab setup and handed me a glassine envelope.

I held it up toward the ceiling fluorescents. The plastic envelope held a collection of what seemed to be snippets of colored paper. And a scatter of little blue dots.

“You know what this stuff is?” I asked him.

“Paper and plastic bits. Art residue, you might call it. The police report calls this an accidental death.” He tapped the envelope with a forefinger. “I call it ‘The Case of Dotty Blue.’”

“There are those neck bruises,” he continued. “Should be a big one on her head where she hit. There isn’t one. Should not be bruises under her jawline. But there they are.”

“Where’d the stuff in the envelope come from, Doc?”

“Her hair. When I combed it out. Standard procedure.”

“You think it might be some new kind of oddball beauty fad?”

“Nope. You’re staying around for awhile?”

“Thought I’d get a room back at the Mountaineer for tonight.”

“I’ve got a spare room, you can bunk here. First thing after breakfast, I’ll show you the crime scene. Well, what I think is a crime scene.”

“You can do that?”

Doc Gosling gave me a crinkly Guy Kibbee grin. “We’re not very formal around these parts. And I’m the coroner. I have a key.”

Dotty Blue’s house crouched at the top of the road’s gentle rise north of town. White adobe and redwood, a jarring combo of two architectural worlds. Precisely pruned shrubbery set off a beautifully manicured lawn. I swung the Bronco into the short blacktop drive and nosed up to the garage door.

In the rear view mirror I spotted an elderly woman on her porch across the street. Her weathered two story farmhouse was way out of place among its pseudo hacienda neighbors. I realized I was duly noting Maude Ruddy duly noting us.

I followed Doc to the multi-paneled front door. No crime-

scene tape. But in the eyes of the local cops, this wasn't a crime scene. Doc fitted a key into the ornate brass lock, and we were in.

I'd judged the house and grounds to be in the mid-six-figures category, pretty upscale for a town like this, but inside the place looked like a pigsty. Well, the flagstone foyer was neat enough, but the big room it led into was a housekeeper's nightmare.

"Told you she'd converted this into a studio," Doc said as we plowed in there. No question about that. Big room with lots of windows, a domed plastic skylight with three large drafting tables clustered beneath it, couple of filing cabinets, several drafting stools, and a scatter of white resin chairs. Some nice landscapes and portraits on the off-white walls.

But none of that was what instantly grabbed my attention. What widened the eyes in disbelief was the floor. Over in one corner I was able to observe that it was expensive parquet. But everywhere else, it was littered—snowed under—by a blizzard of chopped paper and plastic bits. The room looked like the aftermath of the world's wildest New Year's Eve party. Except this stuff wasn't confetti. It was snippings, the same sort that was in Doc's evidence envelope.

"What in hell kind of artist was she?" I wondered, toeing the mess.

"Called herself a collagist. All her work was made up of bits of paper and plastic glued to Masonite 'canvases.' Doesn't sound like much, but take a close look around you. That's her work on the walls."

I took a closer look. What I'd taken for landscape and portrait oils were not oils at all. They were made up of tiny bits of paper and plastic, not a dab of paint anywhere. Yet when I stepped back a few feet, each work blended into what looked to my untutored eye to be damned fine "paintings."

Doc pointed. "That one over by the door, *The Last Hunt*. She got old Ben Crowfeather to pose for it. Liked to use local people as models. Looks just like him. He wanted to buy it, but he couldn't afford it. One of her works hangs in the lodge. Collage of pioneers heading west. The lodge owner bought it for five figures. That's what she's getting now—or was, before somebody put an end to it yesterday."

"You're convinced that's the case?"

"Follow me through on this," Doc said. He walked to an area at the rear of the room. "Here's where the body was lying. Face down, just about here. See that single step there, coming down

from the rear hall? That's what her feet were on."

He stepped up to crouch behind a table on the landing. Held up an electric cord. "And this extension cord was looped around her ankle. Come on up here and take a look at this set-up. Anything strike you as odd?"

I checked the lamp on the table and its copious cordage. Seemed okay to me . . . no, it didn't.

"The lamp's cord is long enough to reach the outlet under the table. Why did she need the extension?"

He clapped me on the back. "Exactly! I think the killer rigged that up after the fact to fake the accident scene. The cord probably came from one of the drawing-table lamps. Problem is, this isn't quite enough to pin anybody with murder."

I made a slow circuit of the walls, peering at length at each of Dotty Blue's remarkable works. Then I scanned her drawing tables and the floor beneath.

Doc watched all this in silence, but ultimately he had to ask, "What in the hell are you looking for?"

"Blue dots."

"Should be blue dots in with all the other bits and pieces. She had them in her hair."

"Can't find a one. Not in any of her collages, not on the workta-

bles or under them." I pondered. Then I said, "Aha!"

"Aha, what?"

"Precisely where was her head when you got here, Doc?"

He took two paces from the step and waved his pointing finger in a small circle. "Right here."

And right there I found blue dots. Just a few, but they looked exactly like those in the envelope back in Doc's morgue. Then, on my knees in this same small area, I found several more of the dots.

"Interesting." I stood up.

"Got something?"

"Stiff muscles, Doc. I'm not as young as—"

"Come on, Rod!"

I grinned at him. "I've got half a theory. What I need to do now is talk with the two people who dropped by here yesterday."

"So you have got something," he chortled.

"I might. You told me the Federal Parcel driver discovered the body. Any chance I can interview him?"

Doc Gosling cogitated. "Makes his Bizzabee deliveries, if he has any, late afternoon. We'll keep an eye out."

"And the ex-husband?"

"Manages the Gold Pan restaurant in the lodge. How about lunch there?"

"Sounds good. Mind if I take a

look through the rest of the house?"

"Take your time. I'll be in here admiring the artwork."

The kitchen was most notably green Corfam and hanging copper bottom pots, a combination of low and high maintenance. Through the window over the steel sink I saw the gardener hard at work with manual clippers on the yew hedge along the back lot line. Must have been paid in advance. Conscientious man.

I opened the kitchen door and stepped out on the lawn. The hedge clipping stopped. The grass was dense and spongy as I walked out to the tall, sun-leathered gardener who sported a nose that would be an eagle's envy.

I stuck out my hand. "Name's Rod Montgomery. Doc Gosling's asked me to give him a hand with the, ah, unfortunate situation here. Like to talk with you about it."

"Bingham. Ned Bingham. Terrible thing." He set the hedge shears on the grass, stripped off his grubby work gloves and stuffed them in a hip pocket. His grip was firm, calloused, what you'd expect from a man who made his living with his hands. There was a tang of yew sap in the still air.

"I'm kind of surprised to find

you out here, now that Ms. Blumentripp is no longer with us."

Bingham stroked his great blade nose with thumb and forefinger. "Already paid me for the month."

Diogenes would have been fulfilled.

"You see anything out of the ordinary yesterday, Mr. Bingham?"

"Folks call me Ned."

"Ned, then."

"You mean around the time she fell?"

"I mean anytime yesterday, Ned."

He swept a denim-sleeved arm toward the back of the property. "Plenty of hedge to trim. I spent yesterday on it, finishing it up today. When I clip hedge, that's what I see. Got no time to lollygag around, poking into what ain't my business."

"I take it that's a no."

"No what?"

"No, you didn't see anything unusual yesterday."

"You got it right." Bingham picked up his hedge clippers. "You got any more questions?"

Not at the moment, but I certainly reserved the right. I walked back to the kitchen door and went on with my tour.

Dotty Blue's bedroom, like the kitchen, was a model of neatness, in wild contrast to the mess on the studio floor. I was-

n't learning a thing back there, so I rejoined Doc in the studio.

"If there's anything more to see here," I told him, "I've missed it. Care to join me in a neighborly visit across the road?"

"I'd better introduce you," Doc cautioned. I soon discovered why.

"Who?" Maude Ruddy yelped in a razor-edged voice loud enough to slow traffic.

"Rod Montgomery," Doc repeated patiently. "He's helping me on the Blumentripp, uh, case."

Maude Ruddy was eighty-seven, Doc had told me, Bizzibee's longest-in-residence widow. Beneath her abundance of snowy hair, she was built of sharp angles. Her blue sundress draped loosely from a frame of wire, and she had a barbed wire outlook.

"Case!" she snapped. "Thought she fell and broke her neck."

"That may well be, Mrs. Ruddy," I ventured, "but I—"

"A lot you know about it!"

"I've filled Rod in," Doc said.

"What I'd appreciate your telling me," I said with utmost civility—funny how blatant peckishness produces that reaction—"is what you observed across the road yesterday while—"

"You mean who went in and out and when they did it? Already told that to Chief Dixon."

"And how they seemed to be

reacting when they left, Mrs. Ruddy."

"Oh. Didn't tell him that. He didn't ask." She stopped her flank speed knitting and squinted up at me. "Tad Trimbull, ex-husband. In just before noon, out in ten minutes. Looked fit to be tied. Screeched his tires when he drove off. Federal Parcel driver walked straight in at three fifty-five, out in three minutes. Looked like he'd seen a dead body. Which he had. He waited out front for the police to arrive."

"And that's all? Could you possibly have missed someone? Maybe when you went in for lunch."

"Don't have lunch. That's how I keep this girlish figure."

I smiled.

"You're sure, Maude?" Doc put in.

"'Course I'm sure, Dr. Frankenstein."

We thanked her and ambled thoughtfully back across the blacktop to my Bronco.

"What was that Frankenstein bit?" I asked him.

"Oh, she found out somehow that I'd been a GP. Wanted me to take her as a patient. But I'm out of that now, so she has to go to the clinic up in Cloudman. Hates me for it, hates what I do." He slid into the passenger seat. "You want to talk to Trimbull? It's just about lunchtime."



*

The Mountaineer lodge was rough-hewn pine outside and in, lots of it, and lots of Navajo rug-gery, floor and walls. Over the fireplace hung a giant painting—no, it was the collage Doc had told me about. Wagons west, with a pioneer's prominent profile in the foreground. Looked familiar.

Doc made a courtesy intro to his daughter, a pleasant, plump, and preoccupied blonde in her mid-thirties. Then we strolled into the Gold Pan restaurant, its roughcut pine festooned with old pickaxes, rusted nugget-washing pans presumably used by prospectors long gone, and other gold mining artifacts. The menu was compatible with the decor: "Nuggets of Chicken," of course, along with "Mine-estron Soup," "Candied Carats," and "Ore-eo Pudding." Our lanky waitress wore a gold lamé miniskirt.

"Waddle ya have, gents?" Her hair was gold washed and piled high.

"We would like to have a word with Mr. Trimbull," Doc said. "Is he available?"

"Tad's *always* available," she said saucily. "Lemme gettin."

A few minutes later Trimbull swivel-hipped among the tables and pulled up at our booth. Terrific tan, nifty contrast with his blow-dried, prematurely platinum hair. Dark trousers out of

Brooks Brothers, plaid jacket out of Pimlico.

"Hiya! Oh, Doc, it's you and—?"

"Friend of mine. Rod Montgomery from back East. He's helping me on the Blumentripp matter."

"You need help for a simple accident case? What help?"

I thrust out my hand. "Good to meet you, Mr. Trimbull. Why don't you join us for a couple of minutes?"

Puzzled, Trimbull slid his lithe length into the booth, opting to sit next to Doc. "What 'Blumentripp matter'?"

"Some minor points we're trying to clear up," I assured him. I didn't need him any more defensive than he already was.

"Like what?"

"I'm told you visited her yesterday. Around noon."

"By old Maude Ruddy, no doubt."

"Seems to be a reliable witness."

Trimbull's steely blues narrowed. "You a lawyer?"

"No, I'm what Doc told you. An old friend of his."

Trimbull's unblinking stare didn't waver. Then he smirked. "Retired cop."

I met his smirk with one of my own. "Call this a hobby. What was that yesterday, a social call?"

"I don't have to answer questions from you, Red."

“Rod. Of course you don’t. But that would make both of us wonder what you might be hiding, wouldn’t it?”

He mulled that over. Then he said, “When Dorothy and I split a year ago, she got the Mercedes, I got the Chevy. But they were in both our names. Couple of days back, I bought a new Buick. When I went to trade in the old Chevy, there was her name on the title. I went out to her place to get her signature.”

I took a swallow of the ice water our gold-plated waitress had just plunked down. “What shape was she in when you got there?”

“Same shape as when I left, Rod. Just as nasty as ever.”

“She sign the title?”

“After giving me a bunch of lip.”

“Don’t you need a title signature notarized?”

Trimbull smiled icily. “Once a cop, always a cop. Happens I know a notary who’ll fudge a bit. She put her seal on it later yesterday. Buick dealer has it now.” He looked smug enough to slap. “Anything else?”

“Maude Ruddy said you looked a bit out of sorts when you left. ‘Fit to be tied,’ she put it.”

He shrugged. “She’s right. But that’s how I feel every time I have business with my former beloved. A real bitch on wheels she is—was.” He stood. “Gentle-

men. Would you like to order now?”

The Fed Parcel truck came through Bizzibee right on schedule. There wasn’t real urgency in talking to the driver because he’d arrived at Dotty Blue’s place after she’d been dead for three to five hours. But I’ve always been task-oriented, and the Fed Parcel man was part of this task.

It was a simple matter of flagging down the red and blue truck as it reached Doc’s place.

The driver was a size XXL rawboned guy in a dark blue FPS jumpsuit. Shoulders like a grizzly. Thick black hair combed straight back.

I threw him a quick smile and reached up to shake his hand. “Rod Montgomery, friend of Doc Gosling’s. Helping him out on the Blumentripp death.”

He shut off the truck’s clattering diesel, swung out of the open-sided cab, and swallowed my hand in a huge paw.

“Sid Mankel,” he said. Like a lot of big men, he had a surprisingly gentle voice. “Glad to help if I can. She was a steady customer of mine. Art supplies near every week.”

“A witness tells us you walked straight into her place.”

He smiled. “Mrs. Ruddy keeps close tabs on things. Dorothy hated to be interrupted to an-



swer the door, so I had a standing order to walk right in. Door was never locked. Like I told the police, I got there just about four yesterday. God, I was real sorry at what I found. Her on the floor. Dead."

"How'd you know she was dead?"

"Checked her pulse. Nothing. And she was real cold. She was dead, all right, way past CPR. We're trained in that. I called 911."

Parcel man Sid hadn't told me much of anything, but I hadn't expected him to. I had my man.

The phone call came just as Doc and I finished packing in tender roast chicken and home-fried red-skinned potatoes. He could have shamed the chef at the Gold Pan.

Doc's side of the conversation was, "You don't say! . . . Well, I'll be a monkey's grandfather . . . How about that!" and similar interjections. When he hung up, he came back to the kitchen table, plunked down and stared at me.

"Well?" Doc said.

"Well, what?"

"How'd you do it? Chief Dixon sweated him like you suggested, and he cracked. How'd you know he'd asked for a piece of the dough she got for that collage in the lodge he'd posed for? How'd you figure out he was so mad at her go-to-hell attitude that he

slipped in through the kitchen door, threw a fatal neck-snapping hold on her, and rigged the 'accident' scene? How could you know all that? Nobody else did."

"I'm a good P.I.," I said smugly.

"Oh, sure." Doc shoved in a forkful of chicken, chomped, swallowed, chased it down with a long pull of ginger beer, and banged the bottle down on the table. "Come on, Rod, how'd you do it?"

I wondered if I should tell him that since nobody else was seen going into Dotty Blue's house yesterday, it almost had to be Trimbull or the gardener—unless somebody else slipped by Maude when she might have been dozing, or sneaked through the kitchen door when Ned Bingham was preoccupied with yew hedgery. Unlikely in both hypotheticals, but possible. But all that was beside the point.

What clinched Bingham as the murderer were the blue dots. I'd seen dots like those before: rows of non-slip plastic dots lining the palms of a pair of work gloves I'd once owned. When they got old—like the gloves Bingham had stripped off when we shook hands—the dots began to shed.

"Rod," Doc pleaded. "For God's sake, *tell me!*"

I relented. "It was just a matter of eyeing all the dots."

"Huh?" Doc said. □

Friend of the Sheriff

Marlys Huffman



“It’s Jed Clayborn again,” the dispatcher said. A corner of her mouth twitched. “You know, the guy who knows Sheriff Jan Fletcher personally.” At that point she snickered.

By the time I took the call and headed out the door, she was openly laughing.

I didn’t bother explaining that Jed might have a legitimate com-

plaint for once. My staff considers Jed a pain in the eardrums, and they leave him to me.

I don't enjoy Jed's company any more now than when we were in grade school, but I do like the drive out of town. The road to Jed's place winds through a narrow canyon with glimpses of a creek between stands of scrub pine and alder.

About four miles from town, when I spotted Jed's mailbox with its familiar slump, I pulled up on the shoulder of the road. Maybe Jed thought his bridge was safe but I didn't have enough faith in it to risk dropping a county car into the creek.

At the sound of laughter from under the bridge, I grinned to myself. Jed's two boys were escaping the July heat, and I couldn't blame them. Except for a strip of dirt about a foot wide, the creek banks wore coats of moss and fern with some Queen Anne's lace lining the top of the bank.

I stared at the bare strip, wet and glistening. It looked like an otter slide, and I hadn't seen an otter since I was in grade school.

"You gonna stand there all day or are you gonna do some work?"

"I'm coming, Jed," I answered.

Jed isn't any easier to take in person than he is on the phone. He stood at the end of the bridge, a scrawny skin-bagged bunch of bones, with his chin jutting defiantly up at me. I sighed and followed him up the hill to a shed that leaned even worse than his mailbox.

"There!" he announced. He yanked the door open and pointed to a stack of tires. "Right there. I had a matching set, and somebody stole two of them."

I stepped into the shed, ducking my head to avoid a collection of rusted tire chains, and peered around stacks of automotive parts. There were several stacks of tires, but I took the stack Jed indicated, flipped the top tire upright, and scanned the numbers on the sidewall.

"Jed, you don't own anything these tires would fit."

"What's that got to do with it?" he said. "For your information, I was gonna sell them at the flea market."

I backed out of the doorway, and Jed slammed it shut.

"Well, you gonna get my tires back or not?"

I shrugged, wondering how he expected me to find two missing tires in a county as big as ours.

"Any strangers been around?" I asked.

"Nobody but Betty's kinfolk." Jed shook his head and frowned.

"'Course, some of them are pretty strange. Always showing up here when they're hungry."

"It's Betty's cooking," I said. "Think she saw anyone?"

"Ask her yourself," he grumbled. "She told me to ask you in for rhubarb pie and coffee, but I told her you were too busy."

"Never too busy for homemade pie." I ignored the scowl. "Tell her I'll be in as soon as I talk to your boys."

"What for? They never do anything but play. Not a lick of help from either of them."

"They're probably down by the road a lot. They might have seen someone," I answered. "Never hurts to ask."

As I strolled down the hill, I could feel him watching me, but it didn't matter. At least he wasn't trailing along beside me. I'd never get any answers with him there.

The boys were standing at the edge of the creek when I came up to the top of the bare strip of ground. The younger one stuck his thumb in his mouth and ducked his head, but the older one gave me a hesitant smile that faded almost instantly. I bent down and looked soberly at both of them. I couldn't remember the younger one's name, but the older one was called Ben.

"Looks like you two must have a lot of fun," I said. Neither of them answered, but Ben slowly nodded his head.

"This isn't an otter slide at all, is it?" I asked.

The boys exchanged glances but remained silent.

"You know what it looks like to me?" I said. "It looks like maybe someone's been rolling tires down the bank. Maybe seeing whose tire goes farther into the water."

The small boy jerked his thumb out of his mouth. "Don't tell Dad! Please?"

"He'll make us do chores all summer." Ben choked out the words.

I let them squirm for a few minutes before I stood up. "Maybe I can fix it, but you'll have to get those tires out from under the bridge and get them dried out."

"It won't help," Ben said and stared down at his feet.

"Give me a few minutes," I said and headed for the radio in my car. It took only a few minutes to confirm my suspicions before I headed back up the hill.

Jed let me finish my pie without fussing, but when Betty refilled my coffee cup, he objected. "She's got to find my tires," he snapped.

"Oh, I know where they are," I said. I saw Jed's eyes narrow and

shift toward the window, so I said quickly, "You know this reminds me of old times—like when we were in grade school."

"We're not kids any more," Betty sighed.

"But we had fun," I said. "Remember that time when someone turned a snake loose in the girls' bathroom?"

"You call that fun!" Betty slammed her cup down on the table. "If I find out who did it, I'll choke him. Scared me so, I ran out of there with my pants down around my ankles."

Jed took a long drag of his coffee and glared at me over the top of his cup. "Some of us grow up and go to work. Like an elected official ought to do."

I grinned and took his advice, with Jed following me down the hill. He looked at the two tires drying in the sun and then up at me.

"Guess the water won't hurt them," he said.

"Not as much as having Betty find out you turned the snake loose."

"Sometimes I wish I didn't know you," Jed said. "Matter of fact, I'm not going to admit it to anyone."

I saw Deputy Moran's car pull up behind mine and smiled with relief when he waved a piece of paper in the air.

"What's he want?" Jed muttered. He shifted his feet nervously and watched Moran cross the bridge.

"We want to search your property, Jed. Moran's brought the search warrant I requested."

"What for?" He turned toward me with one fist clenched. "I wanted you to find my tires, and you found 'em. Now you can get out of here."

Moran handed him the search warrant, and Jed barely glanced at it before he took a wild swing at my head and missed.

"Stolen property! That's nuts. Anyone can have a bunch of tires. A tire's just a tire. You can't prove nothing!"

"Afraid we can, Jed. The D.O.T. numbers match some of those on our stolen property list."

"D.O.T.?"

"All tires have Department of Transportation numbers on them. They're put on there to identify the tire in case of a recall, but it helps identify stolen property, too."

As we headed up the hill to his shed, Jed muttered, "It's the last time I'll ever call you for anything."

I didn't tell him how grateful my staff was going to be. □

FICTION

GREEN TEA

Nancy
Simpson Hoke



Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 10/96

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Inez had been horrified at the suggestion that she was leaving on an adventure. Whatever gave people the idea that merely being on an island in the South Pacific made a woman susceptible to mischief?

And so soon after her mother's funeral! Surely, it was obvious she had accepted Aunt Marguerite McBean's invitation only because she felt so useless and at loose ends. She had no intention of "kicking up her heels," as someone had put it. According to Aunt Marguerite, the Tokajimā Door of Grace Missionary School was in a village that still relied on the monsoons to fill rooftop water tanks. It was the last place anybody would go to "kick up her heels."

Inez was equally indignant at the suggestion that Aunt Marguerite had issued her invitation out of pity. As if Inez were an orphaned child instead of a forty-two-year-old woman! Aunt Marguerite McBean *needed* Inez. She'd made that quite clear in her letter.

"Our heretofore reliable Miss Saunders has left us for a traveling tatami salesman," she'd written. "I have no idea how she mastered enough Japanese in six months to carry on a tryst. Her ignorance of the language was one of the reasons I hired her. I thought she'd be less likely to let the children lapse into

Japanese if she didn't know any herself. She told me that the tatami salesman saw her as a rare and exotic creature. I refrained from pointing out that he could say the same about a Galápagos tortoise. She offered to return to her job after their wedding trip to Thailand, but what kind of example would she be? You'd think she could have bridled her romantic inclinations until the end of the term, but what's done is done.

"That leaves the school in desperate need of a teacher and you, I expect, are in desperate need of a change of scene. Although your uncle and I haven't seen much of you since we came to the mission, your letters have been most revealing. I see excellent grammar and spelling. I see someone as indefatigable as a coal miner and patient as Penelope. My sister, God bless her, was trying enough when she was well. She must have been insufferable after some of her complaints turned out to be bona fide symptoms.

"I can't offer you much in the way of pay. The Door of Grace School operates on a very frayed shoestring. What I can offer you is a lovely setting—wait until you see the hibiscus!—and the chance to make use of all your years of experience catering to childish behavior. I admit that you'll be leading a practically

cloistered life. (Miss Saunders is an anomaly, believe me.) But our little near-nunnery probably will seem less suffocating than what you're used to. And then, in two years, Brother Bob Gustersen and his wife Irene will take the Door of Grace torch. Your uncle and I will retire to our little bungalow in Maui. You are welcome to live with us. You could play the piano for our at-home devotionals. Arthritis is taking its toll on my playing, I'm afraid.

"Anyway, my dear, isn't it time you made use of that degree you earned—how many years ago? Write soon and I'll help you with your itinerary."

If Inez had been wavering, she wavered no more. Why, it had been twenty-one years since she graduated from the West Piedmont Teachers' College! Twenty-one years!

She'd been a day student, of course. Her parents thought it best she not live in the unsettling atmosphere of a dormitory. When her father died in the middle of her junior year, it had seemed she might not finish. Her newly widowed mother succumbed to a crying jag whenever Inez was away from the house for more than an hour or two. Inez had been able to squeak through her last year only because Aunt Marguerite McBean had interceded. The cure

for a crying jag, Aunt Marguerite had announced, was prayer. And she began enlisting members of her church for a round-the-clock bedside prayer vigil for Inez's mother. The crying jags subsided immediately. This, Aunt Marguerite pointed out, proved her thesis.

Not long after Inez graduated, Aunt Marguerite and Uncle Clay McBean set off on their Pacific mission, and Inez accepted a post at A. V. Carteret Elementary School. The mission had lasted more than twenty years. The teaching post ended after the first term. During that term, Inez's mother underwent scores of little crises, each accompanied by a demand that Inez be summoned from her classroom. Eventually the school's principal suggested that Inez could not hold down two full-time jobs, tending her students and tending her mother. She must choose. The principal suggested the former. Inez, of course, chose the latter. Perhaps it was just as well. Inez hadn't really been comfortable around the children.

Now, so many years later, the obligation to her mother was ended. Inez accepted Aunt Marguerite McBean's offer in the hope that Asian children would be more tractable than American ones. What else was there for her to do? She steeled her-

self to the disconcerting tasks of arranging for passport, visa, and airplane tickets. She nearly backed out of the arrangement a dozen times, but at every sticking point she told herself, twenty-one years!

Closing up the house wasn't nearly as traumatic as she'd expected. And she felt oddly triumphant when she had her hair cropped to a length more practical for a tropical climate. ("I never realized your neck was as long as all that," her mother had remarked the last time Inez cut her hair.)

She was more anxious about the two ferry rides that composed the last leg of her journey than she was about the long flight that preceded it. She'd started having peculiar dreams about sharks and seasickness. She had no idea how to defend herself against sharks, but she was not without resources in the matter of seasickness. She bought Dramamine and allowed herself an extra day on Nakashiki, the last stop before her destination. Nakashiki was one of the dozens of islands that hopscotched between Japan and Hawaii. Inez wanted to recover from jet lag on Nakashiki before facing Aunt Marguerite. Fortunately, the ferry trip from Nakashiki to Tokajima was less than an hour.

Her first glimpse of the west-

ern Ryukyus, rising like chunks of raw tourmaline from a lapis lazuli sea, was as thrilling as anything Inez had experienced. Her excitement was soured by a twinge of apprehension when customs agents dug glumly through her suitcase. Of course she knew her luggage was as interesting as an eggbeater. Nevertheless, she relaxed considerably when her passport and suitcases were back in her hands.

Aunt Marguerite McBean had sent Inez a stack of numbered file cards, each bearing a message in both English and Japanese. All Inez had to do, her aunt wrote, was wave the appropriate card at one of the white-gloved cab drivers bowing to potential fares outside the airport. Card number one easily worked its charm. Ferry terminal, please.

In anticipation of her trip Inez had read as many books on East Asia as she could find. Still, her surroundings seemed as outlandish as the moon. The driver prattled relentlessly, apparently thinking she could understand him. He frequently said what sounded like the word "cool." It was the least appropriate word imaginable. The heat was like a bludgeon. The air was a steamy blend of fetid and fragrant that alternately stirred her appetite and made her queasy. She stared at billboards and shop

signs and was as illiterate as a baby. In fact, by the time she collapsed on a damp bench inside the wallowing ferry, she felt she'd been battered by the unfamiliar.

Once the ferry was under way, the rush of spray-filled air revived her a little. The Dramamine showed promise of being equal to its task. Of course she knew she was as conspicuous as a three-legged goose. The other passengers—an elderly couple, a tiny woman herding three tinier children, and a group of workmen wearing peculiar rubber boots that separated the big toe from the rest of the foot—cast shy, curious glances her way.

Inez decided her stomach and equilibrium were steady enough to make their way to what she hoped was a restroom. Mid-passage, she was jostled sharply by a stout young woman carrying a box of large pinkish apples.

"Watch where you're goin', will ya?" the girl chirped. "Auntie Pinch-Yen will have a cow if I bring her bruised goods."

"Oh, I am sorry," Inez sputtered in astonishment. "I guess I don't have my sea legs." As a matter of fact it was the girl who had lurched into *her*, but Inez didn't care. She was so grateful to hear a human voice she could understand. And the girl, after poring over the apples for a moment or two, proved to be a reg-

ular chatterbox. Her name was Eiko. And her situation was remarkably similar to Inez's.

Eiko too had lost her mother and was working for an aunt.

"My mother married a sergeant in the U.S. Air Force when I was nine," the girl explained, offering Inez a packet of small glazed crackers. They tasted like fish.

"We moved to California—culture shock like you wouldn't believe. But things went okay. Until my stepfather retired two years ago. Man, he was miserable. Nobody to order around but my mother and me. After she died, he didn't give a damn about anything. Started hitting the hooch. Then my mother's sister wrote this letter asking me to come live with her. She said a lot of stuff about how she grieved for my mother and how I was her only niece and wouldn't I come live with her. I fell for it. Dumb move! What Auntie really wanted was cheap help."

"Aren't you happy here? The ocean is so beautiful!"

"Beautiful, sure. But who's got time to enjoy it? Auntie thinks I'm slacking off if I use the toilet more than once a day."

"Couldn't you go back to your stepfather?"

The girl searched the pockets of her shirt until she found a matchbook. Shielding her mouth with one hand, she deft-

ly picked her teeth with the cardboard flap.

"No way. He's got a girlfriend who hates my guts. Anyway, who has the money? What I'd really like is to finish college. I got through my sophomore year, no sweat. Dean's list one semester. But when my mother got sick, I had to drop out."

Despite the girl's lack of polish, Inez felt a rush of empathy. *She* certainly knew what it was like to sacrifice for the sake of duty. But she was more fortunate than poor Eiko. At least Inez had an aunt who would never intentionally take advantage of her.

She told Eiko about her own mother's death and the Tokajima Door of Grace school. She described Aunt Marguerite and Uncle Clay McBean. She told Eiko about the McBeans' plans to take Inez with them when they moved to Hawaii. To Inez's surprise, Eiko knew more about the history of the Tokajima mission than Inez did.

"It's a real backwater. Kind of like the Pacific version of Mississippi. Wait'll you see the spiders. Big as Frisbees! And snakes under every palm frond. I think it was a leper colony a long time ago. In 1945 the first set of missionaries took in oodles of war orphans and wangled a deal with the occupation forces to buy the land outright. This

was when the exchange rate was about a million yen to the dollar. Man, those days are gone forever. Now, most of the kids are misfits instead of orphans. And there aren't so many of them."

"Misfits?"

"You know, mixed race or retarded or something. Traditional Japanese don't think much of oddballs. Makes it tough on us oddballs." Eiko laughed slyly. "You wouldn't know about that."

Why, yes, she *did* know, Inez suddenly realized. Her mother had always told Inez she had difficulty making friends with other children because she was so much "nobler." Her standards so much higher. But in fact the other girls had avoided her because she was an oddball.

"Want an apple?" Eiko proffered one of the round pink fruits. Inez raised her hand and shook her head.

"Uh-uh. You can't say no. It's bad manners to refuse food. It looks like you suspect somebody's trying to poison you."

"But what if you truly don't want it?"

"You're supposed to accept what's offered, make a big deal about it, take a tiny bite, then put it down."

Inez took the apple. She nibbled at the tart, firm flesh. "It's the most wonderful apple I've ever tasted. There couldn't be a

finer apple in all the world." She set the apple on the bench.

"You've got it!" Eiko exclaimed. "So, you're staying on Nakashiki tonight?"

"Yes. I'm staying at—" Inez fumbled in her belt pouch for card number five. She held it out to Eiko.

"Wild! What a coincidence!" Eiko gasped, slapping her cheeks. "That's Auntie's place. The Inn of the Seven Spirits." Then she laughed. "I'm just pulling your leg. Auntie's inn is the *only* inn on Nakashiki. At least until the Sheraton people convince Mr. Yoza to sell his sugar cane fields. You'll like Auntie's. Lots of Japanese lanterns and shi shi dogs. Special toilet for western fannies. Business is booming."

Long before they arrived at the inn, Inez decided that Eiko was being facetious when she said business was booming. They waited at the ferry terminal a half hour before the island's sole taxi arrived. The driver, wearing white gloves and a Mets cap, drove them up an unpaved spiral road to the foot of a steep flight of mossy steps. The steps appeared to ascend into an impenetrable thicket. When they got out of the taxi, Eiko insisted on carrying Inez's two cases as well as the box of apples.

"My job," Eiko said. "Auntie

would pitch a fit if she saw you carrying all your own stuff. Anyway, you look a little peaked. I think the heat is getting to you."

In fact Inez was starting to feel quite ill. Midway up the slick craggy steps she actually thought she would faint. Eiko offered to stop, but Inez insisted they go on. At the summit the thicket parted at a narrow path that wound a hundred yards before ending at a curved wall. One could pass on either side of the wall into the gravel courtyard of a two story wooden building. Smaller detached buildings were to either side. A voice called from the shadowy interior of the left wing. Eiko answered the voice in Japanese, then whispered to Inez, "Auntie."

A short, sturdy woman in a stiff blue kimono and sedge hat scurried toward them on raised wooden sandals.

The woman bowed repeatedly to Inez and smiled. Frost formed on the smile when she turned to her niece. Snatching the box of apples from Eiko's arms, she spoke to the girl in a voice that simmered with anger. Eiko lowered her eyes and bit her lip. She did not speak until the woman nudged her sharply with her elbow.

"Auntie is bitchier than usual today," Eiko murmured to Inez.

"She says you're very welcome here and all that crap. I'm supposed to show you to the Cherry Blossom Suite. Usually you'd check in here before going to your room. But the plumber's working on a busted sewer pipe; and Auntie says the reception area smells like a benjo ditch. Oh yeah. I'm supposed to make sure you've got yen instead of dollars to pay your bill." Inez nodded. Eiko's voice brightened. "Want something to drink? It's a neat place, really. Wait till you see the bathhouse. And the Cliff of the Virgins. It'll knock your socks off."

Inez gratefully accepted a small bottle of orangeade wrapped in a gossamer-thin paper napkin. Auntie bobbed a few times more and gestured with an upturned palm toward the passageway to the right of the main building.

Inez followed Eiko through the shadowy passageway until they emerged into bright sunlight and a smoothly raked clearing. Two stone lanterns sat atop carefully stacked rocks, looking to Inez's tired eyes like huge petrified pastries. Water from a low stone well overflowed into a moss-rimmed basin. On the far side of what Eiko explained was actually a Japanese-style garden were fiery poinsettia shrubs and slender trees hung with miniature bananas.

It was a lovely spot, and Inez wished she felt well enough to enjoy it.

Beyond the garden were other buildings similar to the main building but with roofs of thatched straw instead of russet tile.

Eiko led Inez to the largest of these buildings, where they both took off their shoes and put on paper slippers. Inez slid back the translucent door on the left of a central hall, revealing a dim room with a muttering sunken pool.

"This is the bathhouse. Women's hours, six till eight. Men's hours, eight till twelve. Men get more. So what else is new? Once upon a time men and women bathed together. Now, most places, everybody is as uptight as the Americans. Auntie said to make sure you understand how it works. You're supposed to lather up and rinse off under the wall spigot before you get in the pool. Western toilet is behind that screen over there. No squatting required. Are you okay?" Inez had leaned her head against the damp wall.

"I—I am a little shaky. I'm sure I'll feel better after I rest a while. What were you saying about a cliff of v-virgins?"

"Oh, that. I'll show you real quick. Look here." She cleared some of the grime from the room's only window with the tail

of her shirt. "The path starts there. Come on, it's not far. Maybe the breeze off the water will perk you up."

She heard the wind—it was certainly *not* a breeze—just before it grabbed her hair and flattened it against her temples. The sound was not constant but veered between a profound sigh and a high-pitched moan. It grew louder as they left the trees and stepped up onto a plateau rippling with bowed weeds.

Eiko linked arms with Inez and charged into the wind. After only a few yards, she abruptly stopped, flinging her arm in front of Inez. Inez felt something cold against her shins and looked down to see a rusted chain barrier nearly hidden in the grass.

Carefully Eiko stepped over the chain and motioned that Inez should do the same. When she did, she gasped. Less than a body-length beyond where they stood, the earth dropped a hundred feet straight down to the sea. Inez stared. She felt a rush of dizziness and grabbed Eiko's arm.

"Hey, are you catching a bug or something?" Eiko asked. "You're the color of raw shrimp. We should have waited till tomorrow for the nature hike. Sorry. You'd better sack out, pronto."

*

The Cherry Blossom Suite was one of the small houses with thatched roofs. As they approached, Inez saw that some of the roofing material was matted and mildewed, with a smell reminiscent of compost.

Eiko cheerily noted the general shabbiness but promised Inez the interior was in better condition. "It's not really a suite. Without the screens it's just one room. But it's a six tatami room. Just remember, stocking feet only." Eiko wormed her feet out of her running shoes. Inez stepped out of her flats. The room itself was clean. The tatami were discolored from long wear but pleasantly scratchy and resilient underfoot. The furnishings—only a low table and cushions—were dust free. In a small alcove an indecipherable scroll was hung above a dull green vase holding two pussy willow twigs and a sea lily.

Eiko pointed out a set of overhead storage cupboards similar to those on an airplane. She then opened a sliding wall panel to reveal a pile of neatly folded bedding. Eiko pulled the items out onto the tatami and arranged a pallet-type bed while Inez made a trip to the bathhouse. By the time she returned, Inez knew that she was not simply tired but genuinely ill. She was trembling with fe-

ver. And the wind from the cliff had given her an earache.

Eiko helped her undress and untied the bamboo shades. Inez slept immediately but kept lurching back to an aching consciousness. At some point Eiko returned with a tray.

"Soba and broth. Japanese chicken soup. And some ice chips to bring down the fever. And green tea for vitamin C."

"Thank you. I feel tired enough to sleep forever, but I keep waking up. I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"No problem. Now, guests with kids—they're a real pain in the neck. Always tearing up the plants and scaring the goats. Whining 'cause Auntie doesn't have any Cap'n Crunch cereal."

Inez sipped the green tea. It was bitter and frothy. "If I could only get my mind off how miserable I feel!" She tried to draw herself upright but settled for resting on her elbows. Her head pounded too badly when she sat up.

"Hey! Take it easy. Almost forgot—here's a couple of aspirin. Well, I could tell you a bedtime story. What's it to be, Peach Boy or The Crane Maiden?"

"I—I can't think. Wait, I know. Tell me how the Cliff of the Virgins got its name."

"Listen, sister, that story won't give anybody sweet dreams. Come to think of it, Crane Maid-

en doesn't have a happy ending either. Okay. If you insist."

Inez smiled. Eiko was enjoying taking center stage—even if her audience was only a sick middle-aged woman.

"Comfy? Here goes. At the very end of World War II, a few Japanese soldiers got stuck here for their last stand. I bet Nakashiki wasn't even on any official maps. But it ended up in the path of the U.S. Navy anyway. The Japanese soldiers mined the beaches and built a few pit traps and convinced most of the islanders that the Americans were going to barbecue them for lunch if they succeeded in landing.

"Six sisters by the name of Urasoe lived with their widowed mother not far from here. One day the mother was on the beach digging up mole crabs when she accidentally set off a mine. The daughters put everything they could find of their mother in a big clay pot and added it to the family tomb, which was really just a cave. Not long after that, the U.S. ships appeared on the horizon, and everybody figured the jig was up. The Urasoe sisters believed they'd be not just barbecued but—worse—raped, so they threw themselves off the cliff. All at the same time. Holding hands, so the story goes. One sister, the baby, survived.

Her kimono got caught on a tree branch growing out of the cliff wall. She hung there for a long time watching her sisters' bodies bang against the rocks with every wave. Finally someone found her."

"How perfectly horrible!" Inez gasped, and felt hot tears sting her eyes.

"Oh, there's lots of sad stories like that on these islands. Anyway, the Urasoe sisters account for five of the seven spirits that are supposed to haunt Nakashiki."

"And the other two?"

Eiko smiled and poured another cup of the acrid green tea.

"Ah! That's another kind of story entirely. Also violent. But racy, too. Maybe you shouldn't hear such a hot story in your feverish condition." Eiko winked as she tipped the liquid into Inez's mouth, holding a folded towel against her cheek to catch any spills.

"Is it like Romeo and Juliet?"

"Aren't five suicides enough for one island? This story is mostly about murder. And revenge. Three hundred, four hundred years ago. The way I figure, it probably happened close to where we are now."

Inez smiled, then coughed. She felt so light-headed. "Oh, Eiko. How could anyone know the exact spot where something happened that far in the past?"

Eiko sat back on her heels. "Some places, three hundred years is nothing." She jabbed her thumb over her shoulder. "Did you notice that big turtle-shaped rock just left of the door? So smooth. It must have been in the sea a million years before it surfaced. Heats up like an electric iron when the sun hits it. The girl in the story had long beautiful black hair. After she washed it, she'd lean back against the rock with her hair fanned over it to dry."

"Is she one of the spirits?"

They both started at the sound of a gong from across the courtyard. Eiko jumped to her feet.

"Oops. Auntie is summoning her slave girl to the kitchen. Got to clean an octopus. Man, that's a job that could turn you into a vegetarian. I'll finish the story of the demon lover another time."

"The demon lover? Is that the same stor—"

Eiko made an "okay" sign with her thumb and forefinger as she backed out the door. "In Japan, this means money, but it still fits, 'cause you're on the money. Get it? Ha!"

Inez made another trip to the bathhouse and returned to her room weaker than before. Her futon was damp with perspiration, but she hesitated to turn it. She didn't want to risk fur-

ther soiling the tatami. Instead, she shivered her way through hours of brittle sleep until what she supposed was dawn broke through the bamboo shutters. She felt no better than she had the night before.

Eiko insisted she be allowed to get the doctor, who happened to be on the island that morning. The slight, elderly man arrived as Eiko's aunt was hanging futons over a line to air. Inez could see the aunt looked surprised to see the doctor. She turned and shook her fist at someone out of Inez's view. Inez saw Eiko walk toward her aunt just as the doctor reached the short path to the Cherry Blossom Suite. Over his shoulder Inez saw Eiko's aunt slap her across the face. The blow was hard enough to make Eiko stumble backward. Inez was stunned. Never in her life had she seen anyone hit.

Inez must have looked especially ill when the doctor stepped into the room. He bowed, then hurriedly fished through a leather case, his glance flickering between Inez and the open door. He looked greatly relieved when Eiko walked in. The red imprint of a hand was visible on the girl's cheek, but she smiled as broadly as ever.

Eiko spoke quietly to the doctor in Japanese, then turned to Inez. She shrugged off Inez's horrified outburst. "Your face!"

"No big deal. Auntie's mad as hell. She thinks you might give some creepy disease to the new guests. And she's worried that you won't have enough yen to pay her and the doctor, too."

The doctor tentatively examined Inez while Eiko acted as interpreter. He left some pills with Eiko and spoke to her for several minutes before withdrawing with a quick bow.

"He said you've got a bug. Drink lots of green tea and call him again if you get worse or haven't improved considerably in three days. That'll be six thousand yen."

"Get it out of my purse, please. It's in the zippered pocket with my passport. You'd better count how much I've got left."

"Oh, you've got plenty." She held up a five thousand yen bill and a thousand yen bill. "I'll give him this, okay?"

Later that day Inez dragged herself into the sunshine. She watched two small children in blue caps chase a trio of ducks around a pan of water. She glimpsed Eiko's aunt, swathed like a beekeeper, squatting among some low plants, seemingly attacking them with a trowel.

Willing herself to move, Inez walked to the main building, where she remembered Eiko's telling her there was a tea room. An elderly woman in an apron

and dish-towel turban bowed over a bedraggled twig broom as Inez came through the screen door. Otherwise the room was empty. The short walk had been exhausting, and Inez gratefully sank crosslegged on a thick cushion placed before a low rosewood table. A pair of cheap aluminum beach chairs were stacked at the far end of the table. For stiff-jointed Americans, Inez supposed.

She was startled by a whirring noise. It was the electronic chime of a Mickey Mouse clock. The clock sat on the base of a cheap western-style china cabinet. Inez pulled herself up for a closer look. Four o'clock! She'd thought it was still morning. Did it matter? The streaked glass doors of the cabinet enclosed an amusingly disparate collection of knickknacks. Inez recognized the small figures representing the seven lucky gods. She'd seen pictures of them in several books. They supposedly sailed into each new year with a cargo of good fortune. To their left, a ceramic coin bank shaped like a hillbilly outhouse, complete with half moon. To its left, a plush Smurfette. On the shelf below, a brass-plated horse with an abacus mounted in its flanks. And staring down from the top shelf with one round eye was a roly-poly red object with a painted black mustache.

"That's a Daruma doll," said a familiar voice. Inez looked over her shoulder and saw Eiko dressed in a plain kimono made of the stiff fabric her aunt wore. She looked quite different. Inez realized she hadn't seen the girl in anything but rump-sprung jeans and a T-shirt.

"Daruma?"

"Buddha's brother-in-law. See, he has no legs. He meditated so long that his legs fell off. Great role model, huh?"

"Why does he only have one eye?"

"Oh, that. You buy him without any eyes at all. You paint in one eye when you make a wish. You paint in the other eye when your wish comes true. Boy, you look like you still feel lousy."

"I probably should have stayed in bed," Inez admitted. "But I did want to look around a little. Is there a telephone?" She sipped the green tea Eiko had set before her and shakily opened a packet of Happy Life crackers. "I should call Aunt Marguerite McBean and tell her where I am and that I may be delayed. If I don't make the ferry to Tokajima tomorrow, how long will I have to wait for the next one?"

"Don't worry about the ferry. The guy that runs the boat is a pushover. Buy him a liter of gas and a pack of fags and he'll take you to Australia. Would you like

me to call your aunt for you? Dealing with the Japanese operators might be a hassle for you. I know it sounds crazy but you have to go through three of 'em to get to Tokajima. Sometimes it takes awhile."

"Would you? I expect I'd better get back to my room. One more good night's sleep and I'm sure I'll be all right."

Inez had only walked as far as the first stone lantern when her knees became so wobbly she was forced to rest a moment on a drum-shaped ceramic stool. By the time she reached her room, she hardly had the energy to unbuckle her belt. She awoke to the sound of Eiko humming.

"How're you doing?" she asked, touching Inez's forehead with the back of her hand. "Fever's down, don't you think? I brought you some more tea and rice and yakitori. Chicken on a stick. You need to go to the bathhouse before you eat?" She uncovered a stack of compartmentalized trays. The smell was heavenly, but Inez was determined to bathe first. She'd never gone so long without washing. Eiko offered to help her, but Inez was much too modest to consider such a thing. She did, however, ask Eiko to stand outside the bathhouse in case she grew faint.

As odd as she felt squatting naked beside the spigot, Inez re-

alized how pleasant the bathhouse might be after one became accustomed to it. The sound of the water echoing against the tiled walls was soothing, as were the buttery reflections from the overhead lights. She felt weary but refreshed when she wrapped herself in her chenille robe. After she returned to her room, she allowed Eiko to brush her hair while she sipped a delicious clear soup.

"You promised to finish the story of the beautiful girl and the—demon lover, did you say?"

"Oh, it's just a silly folk story," Eiko said, fluffing Inez's hair with her fingers. "Hardly worth repeating."

"Please. I do want to hear it."

"Well, okay. Why don't you finish your tea and stretch out, just in case I bore you to sleep?"

Inez lay back obediently.

Eiko sat up straight with her legs tucked under her and her hands hidden in the sleeves of her kimono. Inez was reminded of the funny little legless Daruma doll.

"Long, long ago," Eiko began, "some of these islands were ruled by a warlord named Muasawa. He wasn't much of a warlord, really. The islanders were just poor farmers and fishermen, and there weren't very many of them. But the king of Luchu gave Muasawa the mon-

ey to build a small castle on Nakashiki. In return Muasawa promised the king to help fend off any Taiwanese pirates who tried to attack the Southern Gateway by sea. Some of the castle wall is still here, but it's hard to see because of the vines. And lots of the stones were hauled away during the war. Inside the castle walls there were many buildings. But they were made of wood and of course have rotted away long since.

"This Muasawa had a rich wife he didn't like much. He didn't treat her too badly, though. She'd given him four sons and deserved some credit for that. Anyway, he didn't particularly concern himself with women until one specific girl caught his eye. Her name was Miyoko. She was so beautiful men would bribe her father's servants just to let them get a glimpse of her. She had skin like moonlight and hair so thick and heavy she didn't have to wear hairpieces like most women did.

"Miyoko's family wasn't rich, but it *was* of noble ancestry. Her father was the *jito*, the village leader. But he did a very foolish thing. He borrowed money from Muasawa and couldn't pay it back. Muasawa saw his good luck in another's foolishness. He offered to forgive the debt if Miyoko's father would give Miyoko to Muasawa as his concubine.

Now, being a concubine was not like being a prostitute exactly. Still, it was not as honorable as being first wife. And many men would have been happy to have Miyoko as first wife. But her father agreed to Muasawa's offer. It was more shameful not to pay a debt, he reasoned, than it was to have a daughter who was a warlord's concubine.

"As you might guess, Muasawa's wife was not happy to have this beautiful person in her household. Not only did Miyoko make the wife look like an ogre by comparison, but she was cheerful and gentle and the servants liked her. Even worse, Muasawa didn't get tired of Miyoko as the wife expected but fell in love with her instead. He gave Miyoko expensive gifts, hoping to make her love him in return. But she could not. And she was too guileless to pretend otherwise.

"The wife was almost as angry that Muasawa was spending his affection on the concubine as she was that he was spending his money. She decided to get rid of Miyoko, but in such a way that Muasawa would not suspect her. There are many medicinal plants on Nakashiki, and the wife knew which ones would do what. She secretly gave Miyoko an herb that prevented pregnancy. It was imperative that only the

wife be mother to Muasawa's sons. And even a daughter might win his favor.

"When the herb proved to be effective, the wife took the next step. She sent Ohiro Tanaka to be Miyoko's servant. When Ohiro was a small child, his father had been killed in a rebellion against the king. The king told Muasawa to confine the child inside the castle walls as an example of what could happen to an unsuccessful rebel's son. Ohiro was forced to clean the pig pits and slaughter the piglets and make brushes from the boar bristles. But even fouled with pig dirt he was as handsome as the stars and had a voice as pleasing as plum wine. The wife knew about the pleasing voice because while he worked he sang. She'd seen the women servants risk a beating by lingering within the sound of his singing. He sang songs about loss and death and impossible love.

"What the wife did not know was that Ohiro belonged to a secret group. The group planned to kill Muasawa in revenge for what had happened to Ohiro's father. Miyoko did not know any of this. She only knew that the young man who brought her spring water for her hair was as handsome as the stars. As the wife had foreseen, it was only a matter of time until Miyoko loved him with all her heart. As

for Ohiro, he tried to steel himself against her beauty and gentleness. But he too weakened. While she spread her long black hair over the turtleback rock to dry, he would sing. He sang less and less about loss and death and more and more about impossible love. As the wife had foreseen, it was only a matter of time until he loved her with all his heart. Except for that part of his heart that was forever cold because of what had happened to his father. In that part of his heart he reveled over winning the one thing Muasawa could never win.

"The wife watched these developments with great pleasure. As for Muasawa, he was too vain to suspect, for even a moment, that the one who cleaned the pig pits might be his rival.

"Miyoko and Ohiro became lovers. While Muasawa was drunk with *awamori* and conceit, the lovers would embrace in the dark sanctuary of Miyoko's quarters. Her woman servant, a young cousin from her village, would keep watch for intruders from behind the turtleback rock.

"The wife waited patiently. She waited until the lovers grew careless. They started allowing themselves to sleep until the servant awakened them. This she would do by loudly pretending to shoo the ducks from Miyoko's

ko's garden when the sun pierced the archers' slot in the eastern castle wall.

"But one day the servant girl did not see the sun pierce the archers' slot. She had been dragged away by one of Muasawa's guards. A second guard had been ordered to watch Miyoko's quarters to see who came out.

"Muasawa had not believed his wife when she told him that Miyoko had betrayed him. But he always welcomed the chance to prove his wife wrong. Which is why he sent the guards. Alas, the second guard saw Ohiro creep from Miyoko's door, groggy with sleep and love, puzzled by the servant girl's defection.

"Muasawa did not strike at once. He sent Ohiro to another island to trap *enoshishi*—wild pigs.

"Two months later Ohiro returned. He waited impatiently for Miyoko's servant girl to come to tell him to fetch spring water for her mistress. But it was another—from Muasawa's wife's village—who came to summon him to Miyoko's quarters. Uneasiness filled Ohiro's heart. He passed through the breach in the castle wall and approached the turtleback rock. He forced himself to walk sedately when he saw the long, thick hair fanned over the rock. How he longed to run to her and bury his face in that beautiful hair!

He began to sing softly, but she did not lift her head. He sang more loudly. Still she did not stir. As he drew nearer, he heard the faint buzzing of flies, and his uneasiness turned to terror.

"He circled the rock and saw that the hair and the head of Miyoko had been cut from her body. The beautiful neck ended in ribbons of gore and blood. Her headless body, dressed in white silk, was stretched out on a white silk futon before the barred *shoji* of her quarters. Her feet were pointing north, an arrangement that, according to island superstition, would confuse her soul and prevent it from finding its way in the spirit world.

"Ohiro was mad with grief and anger. He picked up Miyoko's head and laid it on her body. Then, grasping the corners of the futon, he flung the bloody bundle onto his shoulder. He cursed Muasawa in the ancient language of the island, and ran toward the cliff. Muasawa, watching from the Hall of Lordly Plans, ordered his guards to catch Ohiro. His need to see Ohiro suffer was not yet sated. But Ohiro was strong and agile from the months of chasing the wild pigs. He scurried over rocks while the guards stumbled. When he reached the cliff, he did not slow down but

soared over the edge, still embracing the bundle. *Saigai!* As he fell, Miyoko's head slipped out of the futon, flew up in the air, and then bounced onto the rocks. Muasawa made his men launch boats to retrieve the gruesome object. When they finally got to it, it was balanced on the edge of an outcropping of rock, the long hair trailing in the water."

Eiko looked at Inez with gleaming eyes. "No one ever found Ohiro's body. Or the rest of Miyoko's."

Inez's own eyes were stinging. She realized that she had not blinked for some time.

"Oh, Eiko! What a horrible story! Aren't there any happy stories on these islands?"

"Sure. Lots of humorous stuff, too. Have you heard the one about the pineapple farmer and—"

"No, no!" Inez sat up, then steadied herself when the room began to spin. "You must finish this one. Y-you—said there was a demon."

"Ah, the demon. Okay. Here's the really weird part."

Inez smiled weakly and shuddered. More weird? Was that possible?

"Muasawa realized that he hadn't cut off only Miyoko's head. He'd cut off his nose to spite his face. He missed her. She was a lot more fun alive."

"Eiko!"

"Before long, people started whispering that they'd seen a ghost. His ghost. Her ghost. Never together, though. It made everybody pretty jumpy. There was no way those two could be anything but bad luck. They were certainly bad luck for Muasawa and his wife. Nothing went right for them. One son caught whooping cough and died. One son nearly drowned and ended up brain-damaged. One son joined a kabuki troop in Kyoto. The fourth son turned against his father for some reason and joined the rebellion that now considered Ohiro a martyr. They didn't kill Muasawa, though. A Taiwanese pirate beat them to it.

"No sooner was Muasawa dead than the stories surrounding the ghostly lovers began to change. For one thing, Miyoko didn't appear so often. Maybe because Muasawa's wife allowed Miyoko's father to put her poor head in the family tomb. After that I guess she didn't seem so threatening.

"But Ohiro seemed to grow stronger—more passionate—in the spirit world. He kept showing up here, inside the castle walls. Looking for Miyoko, it was assumed. And he began treating any woman he encountered as if she was his dead lover. A woman would whisper

to her friends that the ghost of Ohiro—they had started referring to him as 'The Demon Lover'—had come to her during the night. The woman would remember being disturbed by a man singing, his voice as sweet as plum wine. And in those moments between waking and sleeping, when the body is paralyzed and one cannot resist and scream for husband or father, the Demon Lover would ravish her. Only, because he sensed no resistance and believed he was making love to Miyoko, he was wonderfully tender and considerate. Still—he was dead. So, the women's feelings about what happened were pretty mixed. One woman, so the story goes, actually got pregnant from her experience with the Demon Lover. It must have been a relief to her when the horribly deformed baby was born dead."

"You mean he—why, that's rather like the western incubus."

Eiko smiled slyly. "Yeah, but isn't the incubus supposed to be hideous and evil? The Demon Lover might be scary, but he's also great looking and a terrific lover."

"Then why call him a demon?"

"Oh, in Asia demons aren't always bad." Suddenly Eiko stood up. "Cool story, huh? Probably just one of those Freudian hysteria things. But think about it.

The Demon Lover is supposed to have had sex with women who had just arrived here from far away. Women who couldn't have known anything about island legends. And why only here, where the castle used to be? Why not on the beach? Sand like powdered sugar. Moonbeams on the water. Much more conducive to monkey business."

"When was the last time a woman said it happened?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not for years. Maybe women aren't susceptible to supernatural sex any more."

"What does your aunt think about this?"

"She thinks the Demon Lover is just a crazy story. She'd slap me silly if she knew I told you. Ghost stories give the place a bad name, she says. I say she's nuts. You tell me, wouldn't a lot of women fall all over each other trying to get to the Inn of the Seven Spirits if they thought they had a shot at the Demon Lover?"

"It's too ghoulish to be completely—seductive," Inez shivered. "But you're a mesmerizing storyteller, Eiko. For a while I forgot my poor aching head."

"Oh! let me get you some more aspirin and green tea. How about some Jell-O?"

"That would be nice. I think I am a little better. Really. May-

be I can leave for Tokajima tomorrow afternoon."

"Don't bet on it. I forgot to tell you. There's a typhoon heading this way. Nothing to get excited about. It's supposed to smash the Philippines, not us. But by tomorrow we might get a pretty stiff blow from it. The ferryman won't take his boat out if the water's too rough. Can't blame him. Hey! Auntie has set up her TV in the dining room so we can watch the weather reports while we work. Are you up to a little outing?"

"No, thank you. I wouldn't be good company for anybody right now. But I would appreciate the tea and Jell-O. I've been so thirsty since I've been sick!"

"The fever's probably got you a little dehydrated. Oh, something else I forgot. Your Aunt Marguerite McBean called while you were in the bathhouse. Auntie wouldn't let me come and get you—I was in the middle of plucking a chicken. Auntie says your Aunt Marguerite speaks pretty good Japanese. She told my Auntie that if you weren't well by Monday, she was coming to get you. She said Auntie should get the doctor to come back. Fat chance."

When Eiko returned much later, she breathlessly apologized for the delay. She'd had to open the Chrysanthemum Suite—just across from the Cherry

Blossom Suite—for newly arrived guests.

"Have others come besides the family with the two little boys?" Inez asked.

"Newlyweds. Her family paid in advance, so they couldn't cancel because of the weather. She's a knockout. He looks like something the cat dragged in. Don't worry. We probably won't see them again until they check out. You get some sleep now, okay?"

The green tea did make Inez more comfortable. She didn't mind the bitter taste any more. She quite liked it. Eiko had left the heavy outer door open. Inez couldn't bring herself to get up and close it. Why should she? The tiny foyer to her room trapped any draft, and the darkness afforded her sufficient privacy. She tried to focus on the plastic lanterns strung over the garden. For some reason her vision was a bit blurry. The lanterns looked like illuminated beehives buffeted by an invisible swarm.

She thought she heard the wind from the cliff. Her imagination, surely. But even in her imagination's ear, it didn't sound so disturbing tonight. Rather poignant, really. Bittersweet. That was the word. Someone was whispering in the courtyard. She wasn't imagining *that*. Oh. Probably the honeymooners out for a walk. How vi-

brant the sky was! How lovely the sea must be, crashing against the cliff wall in the moonlight. Inez felt the impulse to walk to the edge of the promontory and see for herself. But she mustn't. She might become disoriented alone in the dark.

The whispering stopped. Then, very softly, a man began to sing. Inez could not understand the words of course. But the voice was true and clear. She sighed and bit her lip. He must love his bride very much, Inez thought. Eiko had said the husband was not an attractive man. Ah, but his voice was as intoxicating as Christmas sherry!

She closed her eyes and curled up on her side, hands pressed into her belly. Odd. She must have lost a great deal of weight since she'd been ill. Her body felt thinner, more fragile. She pulled her hair from underneath her shoulder and wound it around her wrist. Her eyes fluttered open when she heard a strange grating noise outside the door. She was startled to see a figure standing perfectly still beside the turtleback rock. He—the height and bulk of the black outline indicated that it was a man—braced a shrouded pole lantern against his shoulder. It was the lantern, rasping against its bracket, that she had heard. She could not tell but assumed the man was looking out over

the courtyard. Conscious of her open door, Inez waited breathlessly for whoever it was to move away. But he did not. She was beginning to consider whether she was not being fooled by her own eyes, mistaking a mix of moonlight and rustling shrubbery for a human form, when suddenly he raised the shade from the pole lantern. A circle of light escaped. The light was too dim to illumine more than the highest planes of his face. But each of those planes was perfectly beautiful. Inez was stunned both by the beauty and the realization that the man was looking toward her. She strained to call out, to ask who he was, but discovered she was as mute as a corpse. The light loomed toward her, and she grasped her throat with both hands, desperate to force out a sound. Blood pounding in her head, she squeezed her eyes shut, but the light pricked her eyelids like shards of hot glass. Abruptly she sank into an unconsciousness that at some point merged into a dark, heavy sleep.

The next morning Inez was wakened by the sound of Eiko cursing and hammering. She immediately remembered the man watching her from beside the turtleback rock. In the clarity of daylight she decided he had been no more than a fever-

ish hallucination. She hesitated to share her experience with Eiko.

"Sorry to wake you, kiddo!" she heard Eiko yell. "But Auntie insists we batten down the hatches, whatever the hell that means. Big wind is coming."

"I thought the typhoon was going to make landfall in the Philippines," Inez shouted out her door. The wind whipped her robe away from her legs.

"The weatherman's crystal ball must be cracked. It only sideswiped Luzon, then swung northwest."

As the sky grew more sullen, Inez grew jittery. The wind was so—changeable. It would blow relentlessly, driving the red petals from the *deigo* trees like a shower of blood. Then it would stop. And the stillness was as disquieting as the gale.

She wished Eiko could keep her company. The girl had yelled a greeting occasionally as she dashed back and forth across the courtyard, a bandanna tied over her face, her shirt billowing around her. At one passing Inez had waved to get her attention. She was afraid to navigate her way to the tea room through the grit-laden wind. But she was very, very thirsty. Eiko nodded at her pantomiming of cup raised to lips. "Soon!" she yelled. "I've got to find Auntie's lucky rooster, the little son of a bitch!"

Inez felt horribly restless. And useless. She had brought a variety of paperback books with her but could not concentrate on any of them. She paced until her breathing grew wheezy and she was forced to lie down.

A needle-sharp rain began to fall. When Eiko finally came by her room, bringing the ubiquitous green tea, Inez nearly embraced her. She asked a barrage of questions, so eager was she to keep Eiko from leaving. Did the island's electricity come from generators? Would the thatched roof withstand the wind? Did Eiko's aunt have enough stored water for everybody at the inn? Had the island ever been hit by one of those killer tidal waves? Did Eiko ever go to the Cliff of the Virgins during a storm? At this Eiko blinked in surprise.

"No way! Updrafts can pull you over before you know what hit you. You want to be the eighth spirit in this crazy place? Eight is a very unlucky number."

Inez was embarrassed even to have considered something so reckless. What was the matter with her?

That night as she lay in the darkness, Inez had the unnerving feeling that the rain was trying to beat down the walls to get to her. She longed for the prickly feather pillow from her old bed. She could have covered her head

with it and blocked the noise. The tiny flat pillow Eiko had given her was little more than a powder puff.

Eventually she slept. She was wakened—at what hour she had no idea—by the same intoxicating voice she had heard the night before. Instinctively she buried herself deeper in the layers of bedding, but little by little, her face reemerged as the beautiful sound bathed her. The voice sounded much closer tonight. Why, suddenly it seemed to be coming from near the alcove of her room. After a moment of surprise, she didn't feel frightened or violated. She felt breathlessly expectant, like a child teetering at the top of a Ferris wheel. Tonight the song had a touching familiarity. It was sweetened with memories, even if the memories were only of dreams.

She sensed more than saw the physical presence of the singer himself. How she longed to turn on the lamp! But she couldn't bear being disappointed. Or being a disappointment. The man smelled of teakwood and ginger and sea salt. The fabric of his kimono rustled when he breathed between phrases. As he sang, he extended his hand toward her. A great rush of emotion—part yearning, part grief, part hope—brought tears to her eyes. She tried to lift her hand in response

to his but could not. It was almost as though the power of her feelings had drawn all the strength from her body. She was as feeble as dust.

The song ended. He stood quietly for several minutes before walking into the entryway of her room. As he pushed the door open, he looked over his shoulder at her. The moonlight reflected by a hanging mirror flashed over his face. It was the same face Inez had glimpsed by the turtleback rock the night before.

The next day Inez did not tell Eiko about the man. Perhaps because she no longer thought of him as an illusion. And even if he were an illusion, she did not wish to hear Eiko's inevitable wisecracks.

"The typhoon has stalled," Eiko said gloomily.

"Stalled? I—I didn't know a typhoon could do such a thing."

"Oh, sure. Stupid storm just whirls around out there, not going anywhere. I hate the damn things. The guests mope around dirtying up dishes and throwing cigarette butts everywhere. If the electricity goes out, I have to cook over charcoal like a coolie. And if I'm not cooking or cleaning up, I'm stuck inside with Auntie. One more day in the same house with her and I'll go nuts."

"I'm so sorry, Eiko. And you

still find time to bring me green tea and soup!"

"You're okay, Inez. At least you show a little appreciation. Say, the wind's let up. Why don't you get some fresh air? Gather up a few of the tangerines that have been blown off the trees. Auntie's a bitch, but she makes great marmalade. Just remember, if the wind picks up, better hustle for cover. Wouldn't want to get conked by a flying papaya."

Inez was delighted to be of use, even if the stooping made her head throb. She put the small orange-green fruits in the string bag Eiko had given her and walked along the path that led to the cliffs. She could not resist peering over the edge. Far below, crested waves rose and struck the cliff wall, then drew back. Like a nest of glistening cobras. Inez tossed a tangerine over the edge and watched it fall through the spray, then disappear. It was rather an elegant, dramatic end for a tangerine, she thought. Certainly better than lying on the ground rotting in the debris of the storm.

When Inez returned to the tea room kitchen, Eiko was slicing a silvery dried fish with an enormous knife. She was wearing a canvas apron with the words, "Have Tasty Life By Carrots" silk-screened across the front.

The "H" was two cartoon carrots holding hands.

"Pretty silly, huh?" Eiko remarked when she saw Inez smile at the fractured English. "This from the same people who can squeeze a whole sonnet into a five-line haiku. God, you look pretty washed out. Better take a break."

Inez was grateful Eiko hadn't volunteered her to help Auntie make marmalade. She was washed out. But she was encouraged by how far she'd been able to walk before exhaustion set in.

Eiko fixed her a cup of tea and spread several circles of toast with deviled ham. Inez drank the tea thirstily but could only nibble at the salty crackers. She did take them back to her room, as well as a second cup of tea and a dish of banana pudding.

She slipped out of her clothes and put on the yellow cotton kimono that she'd bought from a street vendor at the ferry terminal. It smelled faintly of soy sauce. Her fingertips were still curved around the empty earthenware teacup when she sank into a deep sleep.

The awareness of another's presence seeped into her dreams like raw honey. She struggled to overcome the familiar paralysis that gripped her half-wakeful body. She could only open her

eyes. He was there. In the dark. Just across the room.

Her throat ached with the need to speak—but to say what?

As before, he lowered the lantern and began to sing. But tonight the song was cut through with despair. The outstretched hand opened and clenched in desperation. When the song ended, he moved slowly to the door, fists pressed against his brow.

Don't go! Her sense of impending loss was nearly intolerable. She forced herself to stand and lurched toward him. But he had gone before she was able to walk without staggering. She stubbed her toe on the raised threshold and stopped a moment to nurse the pain before peering into the night. He was gone. No! She could see his lantern light moving into the tangerine grove. It looked so warm and inviting.

She felt something nibbling against her shins and glanced down. It was her kimono whipping against her legs. The wind had risen, and raindrops were pelting the yellow fabric. In the dim light, the spots were dark, like spattered blood.

When she stepped off the porch, she told herself it was only to follow the lantern light with her eyes. But each time it disappeared, she moved forward, toward where she'd last seen it. And she did not retrace

her steps. It was almost as if she were going blind and knew that once she could not see that final flicker of light she would be in darkness forever. She quickened her pace. She did not feel the stones stab her feet or the windblown twigs flail her legs. Again and again the sulfurous moon shot flares through the black clouds, making her momentarily lose sight of the lantern. But she did not stop. Even when she wasn't sure whether she was really seeing the lantern or just moonlight leaping off drenched leaves, she did not stop. Even when skeletal lightning overwhelmed both lantern and moonlight, she did not stop.

She did not stop when her feet slipped on the wet, flattened grass and she fell heavily onto her left hip. She pulled herself to her knees and crept forward, head lowered against the battering wind, until her knuckles scraped an icy link of chain. She realized she was near the cliff. She jerked her hand back, then was dismayed when she could not find the chain again. Was it to her left? Had she turned completely around? The wind gave her no guidance, it seemed to slash at her from every direction. She inched ahead until she touched a cluster of sawtoothed rocks and felt the sting of salt spray

in her eyes. She must be within inches of the cliff. She couldn't seem to think clearly. Why had she come to this place? She reached out, blinded by a sudden torrent of rain, and felt the wind lift her flattened palm like a kite. She could not see, but imagined, the waves below, tossing up beautiful streamers of foam and moonlight. The ground seemed to undulate beneath her, but she finally managed to stand.

The rain had saturated the yellow kimono. When she shifted from one foot to the other, she stepped on the sodden, stretched-out hem. A gust of wind hit her between the shoulder blades like a fist. One nasty stab of pain when her chin struck the earth, another when her shoulder bounced against a coral shelf, then breathtaking liberation from all that was hard and hurtful. She knew instantly that she was falling, of course. It took a moment for her to accept that the fall would end her life. It took another moment for her to realize that she really didn't mind. She clutched at the rushing air—but not to try to save herself. Even if she could, she wasn't sure she would. Her clumsiness would make her part of the island's lore. It was her chance to never be uninteresting again.

Marguerite McBean watched the girl walk up the path. Her sturdy calves and broad sun-browned face indicated a person accustomed to outdoor work. She certainly looked sensible enough in her navy blue pleated skirt, white blouse, and lopsided straw bowler. The McBeans had had serious reservations about hiring someone they'd met only once. And at such a stressful occasion as a funeral. But after all, this girl had taken care of Inez during her illness. Her dignified restraint during the graveside service had been most impressive. It confirmed the wisdom of burying Inez on Tokajima instead of shipping her body back to the States. Why should poor Inez be put to rest so far from her surviving family members and a devoted friend? Of course they'd had to consider the financial aspect too.

The girl probably blamed herself for Inez's accident. It seemed ordained, somehow, that she take Inez's place.

Eiko murmured appreciatively over her accommodations, a small cinder block room with faded pink gingham curtains and a threadbare candlewick bedspread the big woman said had been donated by a congregation in Nebraska. Eiko glanced shyly at the woman's horselike face.

"It is charming," she softly ex-

claimed. "I am so grateful for the opportunity you have given me." Tears sparkled in the down-cast eyes. "I have been praying for a change of scene."

"Of course you have, dear." Mrs. McBean nodded sympathetically. "Would you like me to help you unpack your things?" The girl shook her lowered head.

After Mrs. McBean left, Eiko sighed deeply and pulled the straw bowler from her head, sailing it across the narrow room onto the dresser. She peered through the rust-specked Venetian blind that covered the room's slot-shaped window. She watched the tall woman stride across an improvised volleyball court, clapping her hands at a small spotted dog. Eiko couldn't see any children but she could hear a chorus of shrill voices from somewhere.

She had little to unpack. Her aunt had grudgingly lent Eiko the white blouse. The dowdy

pleated skirt she'd bought from a street vendor. It had given Eiko great pleasure to see Auntie's dilemma. She resented being deprived of Eiko's services. On the other hand, she was uneasy about Eiko's presence because she thought the girl had brought bad luck to the inn. Hadn't Eiko brought that sickly white woman to the inn in the first place?

Auntie's voice seemed only an irritating echo now. Eiko stacked her socks and underwear in the musty bureau drawer. She put her music box that played "Lara's Theme" and the papier-mâché Daruma on the bureau. When she saw the Daruma's roly-poly reflection in the chipped, easel-back mirror, Eiko smiled. She dug inside her handbag and pulled out a ball-point pen. Steadying the round red object in her left hand, she carefully filled in the missing eye.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Sharon Mackey





Emotions were running deep in our little town of Deerfoot, Tennessee, the morning of July Fourth, what with every downtown merchant mounting Old Glory like the Confederate Army was finally ready for a comeback.

The elderly Geasley sisters had rubbed their daddy's 1952 T-bird to a glow the day before. It was in the garage and ready for takeoff in the Main Street parade that Saturday afternoon. Word had it they'd been quibblin' over who'd sit behind the wheel this year. On the morning of the Fourth, Prudence, the younger one, drew the short straw, so to speak. It didn't look like Moss Geasley would be driving anytime soon.

It was early when I got there, and the cool fog was slowly turning into the kind of humidity you could bulldoze. I had driven up as usual to check the mail at my late husband's law office.

Jeb had rented the upstairs portion of the Geasleys' rambling white frame house, located just two blocks from Main Street. He'd hung a shingle outside the service porch with a crooked arrow that pointed in and up; JEB E. MURDOCK, LAWYER, it read. I was approaching the black mailbox glued next to his door when I noticed a band of elderly gentlemen gathered near a birdbath and a stand of lawn animals in the front yard. Suddenly Jeb's mail was about as important as the perspiration that was forming on my upper lip. I walked over, craning my neck toward the main attraction: Moss Geasley flat on her back against the green grass with a concrete deer sprawled across her chest. Her arms were outstretched, one palm up and one loosely clutching a rolled-up weekend edition of the *Deerfoot Gazette*. Her kneehighs were rolled down to her bony ankles, and her black shoes were pointing straight up, her heels against the earth.

When it comes to beauty I'm no expert, but the Geasley sisters never were what you'd call attractive. In fact, most of the ninety-nine students at Deerfoot High had Moss pegged as the long-lost twin of Ruffy Jenkins, Deerfoot's resident Saint Bernard. I was beginning to see the resemblance, although there was a slight lack of facial hair.

"She ain't breathin'," said one of the onlookers.

"Reckon she's dead?" said another.

"As a doornail," said a third. They were all sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups, the friendly neighborhood Lawn Ornament Patrol.

"Has anyone called the sheriff? And where's Prudie?" I asked in a huffy tone.



"We just got here," said the chubby one. The others chimed in, nodding, raising their coffee cups. I bent down and checked the pulse in her neck, the spotted concrete deer looking at me like it was all my fault. Needless to say, Moss Geasley was as vital as the hunk of sculpture on top of her.

Just then Prudie came off the front porch in a fury, wrapping herself in a robe, her white hair going haywire. "What is all the ruckus out here? Shoo, shoo!" She waved a toothbrush as the men moved aside. "Oh my Lord!" She dropped the toothbrush on top of the deer and fainted on the lawn beside her sister just as I rushed to catch her. I was too late. And there were the Geasley sisters, after forty-four years of old maid bliss, lying together with their no-fuss pets on the Fourth of July, the American flag keeping vigil over their elderly forms.

I sat on Jeb's law office porch while Acting Sheriff Don Earl Keck went through the regular routine. He and his cronies brought Prudie around with some ammonia and took her into the house. He set two large concrete rabbits and some frogs in the front seat of the squad car, then he wrapped his hands in handkerchiefs and grabbed the deer by two hooves, heaving it off the victim and into the back seat.

Moss Geasley was next. Two paramedics lifted her onto a stretcher, threw a sheet over her, and slid her into the back of the ambulance. They drove away with the siren blaring as if time was a factor here. The crowd began to disperse, shaking their heads, moseying back to their homes or the drugstore.

I thought about the entire scene. It was suspect for sure, and besides the obvious crime, something else was askew. It was something tiny I just couldn't quite get a handle on. I usually have hunches about these things, and thanks to Jeb, I was able to fine-tune my intuitions during his criminal defense years, which were the nine years we were married. When I wasn't teaching mathematics at Deerfoot High, solving for x or proving the Pythagorean theorem, I was Jeb's own private investigator. And that's about all our marriage amounted to. Jeb was only faithful about gambling and seeing other women. He did both religiously.

Although he got proud of me just before he died. Even said I was pretty. I'd found three witnesses to exonerate his client from killing her Aunt Ethel with the metal side of a cold iron. We had an eve-

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ning of semi-romance before he keeled over with a heart attack after a steak dinner.

I was technically still in my grieving months when I became involved in the Curly Pridemore case, my first hired job as a detective. I put Deerfoot's former sheriff Dexter Couch behind bars for whacking his wife's lover over the head with a pool cue. It was a fatal blow and a monumental step toward my career in crime. The ex-sheriff's wife still works at My Lady Beauty Salon in town, and I'd often wondered if she held a grudge against me for exposing the family laundry.

I sat there on the side porch for a long time wondering who had the gall to clobber an old lady with her own deer. Like I said, I usually have hunches, but this time it seemed my sixth sense had taken a vacation.

I didn't want to bother Prudie. She was probably in shock, and besides, Moss was the friendlier of the two, which is not sayin' much. She was the one who let me have an extension on Jeb's office rent after he died. He'd had it paid up for six months, but he's been dead now for eight. My teacher's salary is only adequate, and Jeb didn't leave a cent behind. In fact he left me with nothing except his gambling debts. That's why the law office was still pretty much in working order. I had notions of turning it into my own place of business:  
MARCY MURDOCK, DETECTIVE.

Yes, Moss Geasley was real nice about giving me the summer to clean out Jeb's office, rent free. Now that she was gone, I wasn't sure Prudie would be as generous. I decided to do the job at hand while she was still in shock.

I finally stood up, emptied Jeb's mailbox, and unlocked the door leading up to his office. I was climbing the wooden steps with a handful of junk mail when his phone started ringing. I took the rest of the steps by twos and scrambled toward the ringing sound, shuffling papers on the desk until I found the receiver.

"Marcy Murdock," I said.

"Collect call from the Poke County Jail, will you accept?" twanged a female voice.

"Who is it?" I asked. I was no stranger to collect calls from the county jail, since Jeb had been deep into criminal defense when he died. I had been instructed more than once to always say yes, just like Jeb did with every Jane, Sue, and Mary that came along. I knew the prisoner was allowed to state his identity for free.

"Bob Ed Flathers," he said. I recognized the name. Bobby Ed



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Flathers had snored through fundamental math and basic algebra four years ago at Deerfoot High, and he mowed the Geasley lawn on a regular basis.

"I'll accept," I said.

"Is that you, Miz Murdock? I need a lawyer bad," said Bobby Ed.

"Jeb's not here any more, Bobby Ed. He died, remember?"

"Oh, I forgot," he said. "I guess the public defender'll have to do then." He sounded more miserable than a june bug in December.

"Hold on a minute. What's goin' on, Bobby Ed? Maybe I can help."

"I don't know what's goin' on, but I didn't do it, I know that much."

"Didn't do what?"

"I didn't kill old Moss Geasley. Sheriff Keck picked me up a half hour ago down at Floatboat Creek. I was just down there fishin' on my day off when he comes along and gives me a ride to City Hall. Before I know it, my fingers are all inked up and I'm under arrest."

I looked down through the upstairs window in Jeb's office, beholdin' a bird's-eye view of the crime scene in the front yard below. "Don Earl arrested you?" I said. "Why?"

"Said he found my fingerprints on the murder weapon."

"On the deer?"

"Yeah. I have to mow under those cotton-pickin' animals every week, so of course I gotta move 'em. Now the sheriff thinks I did it. I ain't no killer, Miz Murdock."

This whole setup struck me as odd. First of all, I doubted Sheriff Keck could've acquired genuine fingerprint evidence so soon. He was probably just trying to pressure Bobby Ed into a confession. I suspected Don Earl Keck had other reasons for putting Bobby Ed Flathers behind bars for the murder of Moss Geasley. Like an eyewitness or a motive. "Is there somethin' else you want to tell me, Bobby Ed?" I said. A hefty silence fell between us. "Bobby Ed?" I repeated.

"Okay, okay. Miz Prudie heard me talkin' to Junette."

"Who's Junette?"

"My gal. She keeps me company whilst I work sometimes."

I nodded my head. I remembered Junette. Legs, a boob tube, and long frizzy hair dyed a lustrous shade of egg yolk. "What did you say to Junette?" I asked.

"I said . . ." He muffled a curseword, then took a breath. "I said I hoped somebody would put those two old geezers out of their misery."

"Now, why did you say that, Bobby Ed?"



"'Cause I been cuttin' that grass for six years and all they give me is five dollars. Five dollars, Miz Murdock! That don't hardly pay for the gasoline. And they're as picky as a mother hen, always standin' on the porch pointin' out a weed or a stick. Why, Miz Prudie hit me on the head with a newspaper once for throwin' weeds behind the shrubs."

I stifled my laughter. "When did you say this to Junette, Bobby Ed?"

"Yesterday after I mowed. I was loadin' up the mower in my trunk, and Junette was leanin' against the car eatin' a moon pie. The Geasleys were in the garage shinin' up that T-bird for the parade. I thought they was in the house, but they heard me sayin' bad things about 'em to Junette. It was hot as blue blazes, and do you think they'd offered me a drop of water? No, ma'am."

I sat down in Jeb's vinyl tufted chair and stared at a picture of Thomas Jefferson on the wall near the door. I suddenly felt powerful. Once again I felt the need to make sure justice prevailed in Deerfoot, Tennessee. Little did I know my intuitions would bring about a turn of events I never thought possible.

Before we hung up, Bobby Ed gave me Junette's phone number, and I told him I'd do what I could to help out. I grabbed a yellow legal pad on which Jeb had scribbled enough gobbledygook to gag all of Poke County. I quickly turned to a blank page and started making a list: Bobby Ed, Junette, Prudie, and the elderly neighborhood men. So far only two of the above had motives, Bobby Ed and Prudie. Everybody knew the Geasley sisters had been fightin' like dogs over who was gonna drive the T-bird in the parade. I doubted Prudie would kill her own flesh and blood for the opportunity, and it didn't seem probable she could lift the deer. She could have been an accomplice, however, tipping the killer as to Moss's whereabouts at the appointed time. I left Prudie on the list.

The more I thought about it, the more I believed Bobby Ed was innocent. He was steamed because they were paying him diddly. Even so, he needed the money, and if he got rid of one Geasley, he could lose the job altogether. Bobby Ed was a frustrated lawnboy. He was not a murdering fool.

Junette Petrey seconded that notion. Sort of. I caught up with her, of all places, at My Lady Beauty Salon where the ex-sheriff's wife still works. Much to my relief I saw neither hide nor hair of the aforementioned as I stepped on the welcome mat. In fact, the place

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was shut down except for Junette givin' a perm to the Deerfoot Stars and Stripes Queen, Amber Abernathy.

Junette wound a green-pepper timer and waved me into a back room where a pop machine stood across from three plastic chairs. She grabbed a banana moon pie from an oversized straw purse and snapped the wrapper open, then carefully folded the cellophane down exposing exactly half of the moon pie. She crossed her legs and began to nibble, bobbing her pink sandaled foot up and down in my direction. "So you talked to Bob Ed, huh?" she said, chewing the cardboard pastry. She had yet to look me in the eye.

"Yes, I did. He said you kept him company on occasion while he worked and that you were there yesterday at the Geasleys'. Is that right?"

"I guess so, yeah." She nibbled, looking straight ahead.

"Is it true Bobby Ed told you he wished someone would quote put the old geezers out of their misery unquote?"

"Yeah, he said that. It don't mean nothin'. Bob Ed was always gripin' about the grass cuttin' business. Said it didn't pay nothin'."

"Did you know the Geasley sisters?"

She shook her head at the pop machine. "Naw."

"Did Bobby Ed move the lawn ornaments yesterday when he cut the Geasleys' grass?"

She finally turned her head and looked me slyly up and down as if I were a mannequin on display. The leg started bobbing again, and she started sucking at the moon pie, staring out at a shampoo exhibit. "Lawn whut?" she said.

"Lawn ornaments. The birdbath and the deer and the—"

"Oh, them. Yeah, he moved 'em. Always did." She studied the moon pie where she'd nibbled it straight across down to the halfway mark. Then she tossed it into the trash can beside the pop machine.

I had closed Jeb's legal pad and started to leave when my sixth sense flared up. "Do you know the ex-sheriff's wife, Racine Couch?" I asked.

"Yeah, I know her." Junette licked her lips and dusted her hands on her denim miniskirt. Then looked at me briefly through narrowed eyes. "She cuts my bangs." She flicked long pink fingernails at her forehead.

"How long have you two worked together?"

"Long time." The bell-pepper timer was buzzing at her station. "Gotta go." She walked on her stilted legs back to the redhead, leaving me in a state of pure confusion.

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Prudie Geasley was rocking in a living room chair eating bonbons when I knocked on the front door. She was still in her robe, dried toothpaste and chocolate bordering her mouth, and frankly, she made her dead sister look like a Revlon model. "Come in, Marcy," she said, barely speaking. She sat down in the rocker and held her hands in her lap. "I'm worried to pieces." She reached for a box of Valentine candy on a table to her left. "Choc'lates?" she said, holding the box toward me.

"No, thank you." She rocked back and forth. "I know it must have been a terrible shock for you, Miss Prudie, finding your sister in that kind of . . . shape." I stood in front of the mantel hugging my legal pad.

"Well, yeah, I reckon *that* took me by surprise sure 'nuff. But now we ain't got much time," she said.

"Time?" I asked.

"Before the parade starts up. Daddy's car's been in the parade for forty-four years, and he'll just turn right over in his grave if we . . ." She started whimpering, then looked up at me with beagle eyes. "Would you drive it with me, Marcy? I can't possibly drive it alone. Everyone'll be expectin' me and Moss, and now it'll just be me." She eyed me in a funny way. "You could sorta pass for her, you know. You got that dark hair, and Moss was nearly as tall as you."

I know I'm no beauty queen, but being compared to the late Moss Geasley ruffled my feathers. I was beginning to wonder if Miss Prudie had been nippin' at the bottle. I tilted my head. "Miss Prudie, are you aware your sister was killed today?"

"Why certainly." She sat up straight, trying to strike a dignified pose.

"Did your sister have any enemies?"

"Only one," she said smugly. "That Bobby Ed Flathers." She quickly folded her arms.

I had to roll my eyes. "Did you see anybody around here this mornin' before Moss was . . ."

"Rubbed out? Well, no. No, I didn't. I was sound asleep when it happened. Lord have mercy, Marcy. Moss gets up at the crack of four thirty. She does the washin' and the ironin' and then gets fully dressed just to fetch the paper every mornin' at seven o'clock sharp. And that heart problem never slowed her down one bit. She makes me look bad, always has. There was never any way I could ever keep up with her. Even when we was kids, she always won the spellin' bees and kept her room the neatest, had boyfriends galore—"



I waved my legal pad in front of Prudie, trying to picture Moss Geasley with boyfriends galore. "Did you say she had a heart problem?"

"Uh-huh." She popped a cherry cordial in her mouth.

"How bad?"

"Pretty bad. She was taking more pills than Carter has peanuts."

"I see," I said, looking around the house. "Have other family members been notified of Miss Geasley's death?"

"Not yet," said Prudie. "There's only my niece and her two boys. That's it. I reckon they'll be at the funeral."

I nodded and backed out the door as she poked a finger into the heart-shaped box.

I didn't even bother crossing the street to question the coffee drinkers. My brain was shorting out, and the parade began at five o'clock. That was less than an hour away. It was clear Miss Prudie was gonna drive the T-bird regardless of who'd been rubbed out that day. I felt the need to investigate the crime scene without her eagle eye watchin' my every move.

Also, I didn't want to confront Don Earl Keck just yet. He doesn't take kindly to me these days after I upset the reputation of the sheriff's office last spring. Although I had to wonder if he knew about Moss Geasley's heart problem.

I figured Jeb's office was the best place for me to hide out until the parade started. All of Deerfoot would be lined up on both sides of Main Street for a good twenty-five minutes while I picked over the Geasley yard with a fine tooth comb.

I'd been sittin' in Jeb's office chair pondering the front yard down below when my brain finally kicked in and I realized the squirrel was missing. For as long as Jeb's been dead I've been stoppin' by the office every morning to pick up his mail from the day before. And every morning I walk right past the Geasley concrete pet sanctuary: the birdbath (the centerpiece), the deer, the two big rabbits, several medium-sized frogs, and one squirrel. I was certain Don Earl Keck hadn't loaded the squirrel in the squad car with the rest of the animals.

Since I was trying to lie low until the parade, I decided to start the job that befell me the day Jeb passed away. He never was a neatnik at home, but you'd think a shred of order would be necessary to run a respectable law office. I started stacking paper on the desk into piles until I could see patches of wood veneer here and

there. Then I waded through manila folders, legal pads, and law books on the floor, shaking my head.

That's when I noticed something peculiar in the bottom of the trash can. The can was completely empty except for a shriveled-up moon pie. I looked a little closer. Reaching in and pinching the cellophane by my fingernails, I lifted it out. It had seen younger days, but it was a banana moon pie all right, nibbled straight across down to the halfway mark.

Junette Petrey had been in Jeb's law office, and probably not on business. No wonder I felt so strange tryin' to pick her teensy brain. She'd probably had more fun with Jeb and a moon pie than I'd had in nine years of marriage.

The moon pie slipped from my fingers back into the trash can. I checked my watch. Four forty-eight. A whirlwind was moving through my mind picking up squirrels and deer and moon pies and one Old Glory waving in the breeze.

The window was open, and the outside noise brought me back to my senses. Hordes of folks were walking past the Geasley house down to Main Street to get a seat on the curb for the parade. I saw Prudie back the maroon T-bird out of the garage and idle down the back streets to get in line. She'd taped a little flag to the hood ornament. Soon the neighborhood was deserted, and I was free to snoop. I stood by the window for one more minute to make sure the coast was clear.

My stomach did a double flip when I saw Junette Petrey and Racine Couch tiptoeing out from behind a tree right through the crime scene. I watched as they headed toward the forsythia bushes where Bobby Ed Flathers had been chastised for disposing of weeds.

Junette burped. "Ssshhh!" said Racine, smacking a wad of gum. From the neck down she was a Dolly Parton lookalike. "Where in Sam Hill did you leave that thang?" she whispered loudly to Junette.

"Back there behind them bushes." They shimmied behind the forsythia making all kinds of grunting sounds. I lost sight of them until Junette's legs emerged; not far behind came Racine, holding the missing squirrel against her bulging bosom. They were making a beeline for a souped-up Chevelle across the street when Jeb's office window slipped down a half inch. They stopped in the street and looked at each other, then stared up at the window. I could only stare back at these two beauty shop bandits removing evidence from the scene of the crime.



It wasn't until that moment that Prudie's observation really sank in. Perhaps from behind, in the fog of an early morning, I did look a shade like Moss Geasley. The revelation was painful. It's true we were both morning people. Moss picked her paper up from the lawn every morning about the time I stopped by to get the office mail. Seven o'clock sharp. It occurred to me that maybe Moss Geasley wasn't the original target. Maybe it was me.

Before I knew it, high heels were clicking up Jeb's office steps like a time bomb ticking away. In a flash they were standing in the doorway, Junette with her hands on her skinny hips and Racine Couch cradling the brown and white striped squirrel against a quarter mile of cleavage. Jeb's office suddenly smelled like a perfume factory.

"What're you doin' with that squirrel?" I said, my voice cracking. The realization that Moss Geasley had been mistaken for me had my confidence at an all-time low.

"Maybe that ain't none o' your bizness," said Junette.

"Maybe it's the sheriff's business," I said, reaching for the phone.

"Don't bother," said Racine, fluttering her false eyelashes. "They're all at the parade." Her voice was slow and high-pitched, like Minnie Mouse on strong medication. I dialed the number anyhow, my face turning red with every unanswered ring. She was right. I hung up the phone. "Dexter loved parades," continued the ex-sheriff's wife. "His only crime was lovin' me." She pouted. "Why did you have to take my Muffin Buns away, you—you—tattletale!" She pointed an accusing finger at me, trying to hold onto the squirrel.

Being clobbered with a cement squirrel in my dead husband's office wasn't on my list of things to do today. But if it was going to happen, I had to know the truth beforehand. "Which one of you killed Moss Geasley?" I asked.

They looked sideways at each other, frowning. "We was aimin' to get you," said Junette. "It was all Racine's ideer. She said you deserved it for ruinin' her life." Racine looked down at the floor shameful-like. "She had it all planned out," continued Junette. "I was s'posed to hide in them bushes with the squirrel, and when you came to Jeb's office like you always do, I was s'posed to hit you from behind. Racine said I could have her yellow polky-dot skirt if'n I did it, didn't you, Racine?" Racine nodded, her head held low. "'Bout the time I got the squirrel and got hid real good behind the bushes, Miz Geasley came outside. She'd no sooner picked up the mornin' paper


~~~~~  
than she grabbed her heart and started breathin' real funny. She started to fall, grabbin' right onto that deer thang, pullin' it over on top of her. That's when I got scared and dropped the squirrel behind them bushes. Then I run clear back to the beauty shop and had a moon pie to calm my nerves."

I blinked twice. "You mean you didn't mistake Moss Geasley for me?" I said. They shook their heads in unison like a couple of wooden puppets. "So . . . y'all don't think I favor Moss Geasley?" They studied me, turning their heads this way and that, finally mumbling a series of "Naws" and "Not atalls."

"But you could use a little body wave in your hair," said Racine.

"And some bangs," said Junette.

"I'm givin' free makeovers after the parade!" perked Racine, her bosoms standing at attention.

I reached up and felt my hair. I'd never considered changing my hairdo. I wasn't real sure I'd ever had one. And facial improvements had always been low on my totem pole. Until now. "What about the squirrel?" I said, nodding toward the onetime murder weapon.

Racine walked over to the trash can and dropped the squirrel right on top of the banana moon pie, a gesture I deemed symbolic. "Friends?" she said, smiling, holding out a well-manicured hand. Junette was leaning against the door grinnin' like a possum.

I needed to call Don Earl Keck and tell him about Moss Geasley's heart problem. Junette could testify to the same. I'd get Bobby Ed out of jail as soon as I got my makeover. Lord knew there'd be a rush after the parade. I stuck my hand out over Jeb's desk toward Racine Couch.

"Friends," I said.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# AN ATTEMPT AT MURDER

Karel Čapek



**T**hat evening Mr. Tomsa, chief clerk in a government office, had just settled down with his earphones and, with a gratified smile, was listening to a pleasant performance of some Dvořák dances on the radio—now that's what I call music, he said to himself contentedly—when suddenly two sharp reports sounded outside, and the glass from the window above his head shattered with a crash. Mr. Tomsa's apartment, it should be said, was on the ground floor.

And then he did what no doubt each of us would do. First of all he waited for a moment to see what might happen next, then he snatched off his earphones and looked around rather sternly to see what had happened, and only then did he become frightened: for he saw that somebody had fired two shots at him through the window next to which he was sitting. Right over there, in the door he was facing, a splinter of wood had been ripped away, and beneath it a bullet was embedded. His first impulse was to rush out into the street and seize the villain by the collar with his bare hands. But when a man is getting on in years and has a certain dignity to maintain, he generally lets his first impulse pass and opts instead for the second. And that is why Mr. Tomsa raced for the telephone and called the police. "Hello? Send somebody here at once; someone's just tried to murder me."

"Send somebody where?" said a sleepy and indifferent voice.

"Here, to my apartment," Mr. Tomsa flared in sudden anger, as if the police should have known. "It's perfectly outrageous that someone, for no reason at all, would shoot at a lawabiding citizen sitting quietly at home! This calls for a most thorough and immediate investigation, sir! It's a fine state of affairs when . . ."

"Right," the sleepy voice interrupted him. "I'll send someone over."

Mr. Tomsa fumed with impatience. It seemed to him that an *eternity* passed before the someone came trudging along, but in reality it was only twenty minutes before an even-tempered police inspector had arrived and was examining the bullet holes in the window with interest.

"Someone's been shooting at you, sir," he said matter-of-factly.

"I could have told you that," Mr. Tomsa burst out. "I was sitting right here by the window!"

"Thirty-two caliber," announced the inspector, extricating a bullet from the door with his knife. "Looks as if it's been fired from an old army revolver. See? Whoever it is must have been standing on

the fence. If he'd been standing on the sidewalk, the bullet would have gone in higher up. That means he must have been aiming right at you, sir."

"That's odd," Mr. Tomsa observed caustically. "And here I thought he was aiming at the door."

"And who did it?" asked the inspector, ignoring the interruption.

"I'm sorry I can't give you his address," said Mr. Tomsa. "I didn't see the gentleman and I didn't think to invite him in."

"That makes things difficult," remarked the inspector, unperturbed. "So who do you suspect?"

Mr. Tomsa's patience was close to an end. "What do you mean, suspect?" he launched out irritably. "Look, officer, I never saw the scoundrel, and even if he'd kindly waited until I could blow him a kiss through the window, I couldn't have recognized him in the dark. My dear sir, if I knew who it was, do you think I'd have put you to all this trouble?"

"Well, yes, there's something to that, sir," the inspector consoled him. "But maybe you can think of someone who'd profit from your death, or who might want to get back at you for something. . . . You see, sir, this wasn't an attempt at burglary, a burglar won't shoot unless he has to. But maybe somebody's got a grudge against you. You tell us who, sir, and we'll look into it."

Mr. Tomsa was taken aback: until that moment he hadn't thought about the matter in that light. "I haven't the faintest idea," he said slowly, thinking back over the peaceful life he had led as a government clerk and a bachelor. "But who, for heaven's sake, would have that kind of a grudge against me?" he said in bewilderment. "As far as I know, I haven't a single enemy in the world! It's completely out of the question," he added, shaking his head. "I simply don't have anything to do with other people. I keep almost entirely to myself, I never go anywhere, I don't meddle in anyone's affairs . . . What, for heaven's sake, would somebody want to get back at me for?"

The inspector shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, sir, but maybe you'll think of something by tomorrow. You won't be worried staying here by yourself?"

"No," Mr. Tomsa said reflectively. That's odd, he said to himself uneasily when he was alone, why, yes *why* would somebody want to shoot at me of all people? I'm practically a hermit, for heaven's sake. I do my work at the office and I go home—why, I hardly have anything to do with anyone else! Then why would they want to

shoot me? he wondered with growing bitterness at such ingratitude; little by little he began to feel sorry for himself. I slave away like a horse, he said to himself, I even take work home with me, I'm never extravagant, I never take time out for little pleasures, I live like a snail in his shell, and bang! somebody comes along and fires a bullet at me. My Lord, what incredible hatred there is in people, marveled Mr. Tomsa, aghast. *What* have I ever done to anyone? *How* could someone have such an appalling, such an insane hatred for me?

Perhaps there's some mistake, he reassured himself, sitting on the bed and holding the boot he had just removed. Of course! It's a case of mistaken identity! The man simply thought that I was someone else, someone he had a grudge against! That must be it, he said to himself with relief, because why, *why* would anyone hate me like that?

The boot fell from Mr. Tomsa's hand. But of course, he suddenly recalled with some embarrassment, it was a silly thing for me to do, but it was really nothing more than a slip of the tongue. I was talking with Roubal and, without meaning to, I made an awkward remark about his wife. Of course, everyone knows that woman's cheating on him right and left, and he knows it, too, but he doesn't want people to know that he does. And I, ass that I am, went and stupidly let the cat out of the bag. . . . Mr. Tomsa remembered how Roubal had merely swallowed hard and dug his nails into his hands. Good heavens, he said to himself in horror, the man was crushed! Obviously he's madly in love with that woman! Naturally, I tried to smooth things over afterwards, but the man was biting his lips in anger! He's got good reason to hate me, Mr. Tomsa reflected sadly. I know he wasn't the one who shot at me, that's nonsense; but I certainly wouldn't be surprised if . . .

Mr. Tomsa stared at the floor in confusion. Or what about that tailor, he reminded himself uncomfortably. For fifteen years I ordered my clothes from him, and then one day I was told that he had a bad case of consumption. Of course a man's apprehensive about wearing clothes that a consumptive tailor has been coughing on, so I stopped getting my suits from him . . . And then he came to see me and pleaded that he hadn't a stitch of work, his wife was sick and he needed to send his children away, and could he have the honor of my confidence in him again—good heavens, how pale the poor man looked, and from the way he was sweating I could see how ill he was! "Mr. Kolinsky," I said to him, "look, it's no use, I need a better

tailor; I've not been satisfied with your work." "I do my very best, sir," he stammered, sweating with fear and bewilderment, and it's a wonder he didn't burst out crying. And I, Mr. Tomsa reminded himself, I just sent him away saying, "I'll see," the sort of remark poor wretches like that hear only too often. The man might well hate me, Mr. Tomsa shuddered; it's horrible to go and beg someone for your very life and be sent away with such indifference. But what could I have done for him? I know he couldn't have been the one who did it, but . . .

Mr. Tomsa began to feel more and more distressed. But what's just as painful, he remembered, is the way I bawled out our file clerk. I couldn't find a certain file, so I sent for the old fellow and yelled at him as if he'd been a schoolboy, and in front of other people, too! "I suppose this is what you call keeping things in order, you idiot, the place looks like a pigsty; I ought to throw you out on your ear—" And then I found the file in my own drawer! And the old man never said a word, only stood there trembling and blinking his eyes—Mr. Tomsa felt a hot surge of shame welling over him. A man can't very well apologize to a subordinate, he told himself without conviction, even if he has been a little hard on him. But how those subordinates must hate their supervisors! Wait, I'll give the poor devil some of my old clothes; on second thought, that would be humiliating for him, too—

Mr. Tomsa now found it unbearable to go on lying in bed; the blankets were stifling him. He sat up, wrapped his arms around his knees, and stared into the darkness. Or that business with young Moravek at the office, he thought, sick at heart. He's such a sensitive young man, writes poems and all. And when he blundered so badly in dealing with those papers, I told him, "Young man, you'll have to do these all over again," and I meant to throw the papers down on the table; but they landed at his feet, and when he bent down to pick them up his face grew red, his ears were red—I could have bitten off my tongue, Mr. Tomsa muttered. I really like that lad, and to humiliate him like that, however unintended—

Another face floated before Mr. Tomsa's eyes: the pale and swollen face of his colleague Wankl. Poor Wankl, he said to himself, he wanted to be chief clerk, and I got the promotion instead. It would have meant a few hundred more each year, and he's got six children—I've heard he'd like to have his eldest daughter trained as a singer, but he can't afford it; and I was promoted over him because he's such a slow-witted plodder, a real drudge—His wife has

a terrible temper, but the reason she's so scraggy and bad-tempered is that she's always having to pinch pennies; he chews away on dry rolls at lunch—Mr. Tomsa lapsed into gloomy thought. Poor Wankl, he must have all kinds of bad feelings when he sees me, with no family at all, making more than he does; but I can't help that, can I? It makes me uneasy, though, when he looks at me in that injured, reproachful way . . .

Mr. Tomsa rubbed his forehead, which had broken out in an agonizing sweat. Yes, he said to himself, and then there's that waiter who cheated me on my bill; and I called for the owner, and he fired the waiter on the spot. "You thief," he snarled at him, "I'll see that you don't find another job anywhere in Prague!" And the man never said a word, just left . . . I could see his shoulder blades sticking out under his jacket.

Mr. Tomsa now found it unbearable to stay on the bed; he sat down by his radio and slipped on his earphones, but the radio was mute in the still, mute hours of the night. Mr. Tomsa covered his face with his hands and recalled all the people he had ever met, the odd and inconsequential people with whom he had never really gotten along and to whom he had never really given a second thought.

In the morning he stopped by the police station; he was somewhat pale and distracted. "So," the inspector asked, "have you thought of anyone who might have a grudge against you?"

Mr. Tomsa shook his head. "I don't know," he said hesitantly. "What I mean is, the people who might hold a grudge against me, there are so many that . . ." He waved his hand, baffled. "The fact of the matter is, a man never knows how many people he's wronged. You know, I'm just not going to sit by that window any more. And I've come to ask you to forget the whole thing."



# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**P**hilip Kerr's **The Grid** (Warner, \$21.95) is the story of the glamorous folks who have built a shining new tower in downtown L.A. as a tribute to the power and wealth of the Yu Corporation. Touted as the prototype for the future, the building is run by a massive computer "brain" that will control everything from the security system to watering the huge trees in the glittering multi-story lobby. But what happens if the computer turns psychopathic? Twelve people trapped inside are about to find out. This is a twist on the serial killer format with some neat techno-thriller surprises, although (as is often the case) the killer is the most interesting character in the cast.

Each year St. Martin's Press publishes a first novel as the winner of its Malice Domestic Contest for the best traditional mystery. This year's selection is **Lie Down with Dogs** by Jan Gleiter (\$21.95), and it's pure pleasure. The crisis is immediate: Robert Cooper, successful and cool businessman, runs out of gas on a dark, lonely rural road. He sets off to seek help but instead finds a small, brave boy, a resourceful young woman, and a huge dog who are in desperate need of his aid. Thus begins a chase that makes this book impossible to put down. But the joy here comes from the characters, their snappy dialogue, and their growing connections to one another. Gleiter's debut novel should prove a winner.

Janwillem van de Wetering's latest, **The Hollow-Eyed Angel** (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$22), brings back the gang from the earlier books in the Amsterdam police force series: Gripjstra and his younger partner DeGier, their beloved commissaris, even the old man's pet turtle. A complaint by a Dutch colleague that his uncle's case was closed too speedily occurs just as the senior commissaris

is off to Manhattan to attend a police conference. That is where the uncle had been living, and it's also where he died: his ravaged body turned up in Central Park. Thus the commissaris undertakes, in New York, his final case before retirement. Like the Zen that the author has studied, this series asks for patience and a right-brain approach. The reader is rewarded with gentle wit, thought-provoking conversation, and a surprising look into the human heart.

Thomas Perry reprises Jane Whitefield, the heroine of *Vanishing Act*, in **Dance for the Dead** (Random House, \$21), and it's a dilly. A young woman of Native American descent, the orphaned daughter of a blue collar laborer who lives quietly in her childhood home in upstate New York, Jane helps people disappear. Her clients are running for their lives, usually from the mob or abusive boyfriends; Jane helps them make a clean break and teaches them how to start again in a new town with a new identity. This time, however, the rescue of a small boy and the flight of a woman con artist have a deadly link: both are being sought by a man who heads a powerful and dangerous security network that spans the entire country. From the smallest details to the larger scheme, Perry has plotted a thriller filled with enough twists to make *Dance for the Dead* one of the most exciting caper novels to come down the pike.

Dianne Day follows up her popular debut with the second appearance of Fremont Jones in **Fire and Fog** (Doubleday, \$21). The time is April 18, 1906; the place is San Francisco. The date is remarkable for the Great Earthquake that occurred in the early hours of the morning. Fremont Jones is a young woman of wealthy Boston stock who has abandoned her given name to adopt that of her famous California ancestor. It seemed appropriate, as she's moved to the Coast with only a typewriter and the determination to make her own way in the world. In a matter of minutes, however, her world is turned upside down. Like thousands of others, Fremont is made homeless. As she stoutly assists the Red Cross, the author gives us a picture of what those early days were like in a city wracked and ruined by earthquake and the resulting fires. There's also a mystery surrounding Fremont's new housemate, a smitten suitor, a plot to rescue her friend Mei Ling's pearls from the rubble, and a harrowing brush with Japanese Ninja. But it's Day's light and romantic touch with her spunky heroine and the men in her life that makes this series sparkle.

Joan Hess adds another lively case to her amateur bookseller's

(continued on page 158)

# THE STORY THAT WON



The May Mysterious won by Richard W. Connecticut. Honorable Feldman of Mongaup A. Daly of Burlington, Kesling of Ann Arbor, of Calgary, Alberta,

Photograph contest was White of East Lyme, mentions go to Bert S. Valley, New York; Vicki Ontario, Canada; Robert Michigan; R. J. Stevens Canada; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; William D. Long of Rolling Hills Estates, California; Mark O'Shea of Canby, Oregon; Barry Baldwin of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Deanna Conley of Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Austin Peterson of Evanston, Wyoming.

## SHOELESS by Richard W. White

"All right," rasped Sergeant Ryder horsely, for he'd caught a colt and had a nagging cough, "we know the perp was mounted, that he assaulted Mr. Crane with a punkin, that he rode this way. So let's quit stallin' and—"

"Anybody talk to the victim?" Officer Seth Saddler horned in.

"Can't till his condition is stable."

"Any prints, sarge?" queried Corporal Carl Crop.

"Lost 'em on the bridge, but we'll find some up ahead."

"I mean fingerprints—on the pumpkin."

"Lab's workin' on it. Mane thing is to snag the perp. He's obviously de-ranged, so—"

"Wait a bit, sarge," said Constable Irv Quirt. "I thought we had a tail on this bozo."

"We did, but the Mare's cut our overtime budget. Didn't wanna stir-up the taxpayers in an election year, so—"

"How's she know what the taxpayers think?" Irv snorted.

"Took a gallop poll," Ryder snapped. "The neighs had it."

"But in a case of foal play—?"

"Yeah, well, the voters rein supreme. You wanna fight it, write to Washington, Irving."

Quirt bridled at the suggestion.

"Say, what kinda mount is the perp ridin'?" asked Officer Barnes.

"Quarter horse. Calls him Buck, but we think it's an alias."

"Makes cents. But quarter horses are a dime a dozen. How we gonna reckonize the perp?"

"Easy," Ryder said. "He's proolly the only horseman between here and Philly runnin' around without a head."

*(continued from page 156)*

resume with **Closely Akin to Murder** (Dutton, \$22.95). Claire Malloy is shocked to get a call from her cousin Ronnie, whom everyone had assumed to be dead. Thirty years ago the teenaged Ronnie was accused of murdering a famous Hollywood producer in Acapulco. Soon thereafter her parents and a third person were the victims of a fatal car accident, and it was thought that Ronnie was the third person. She wasn't. Instead, she did her time in a Mexican jail, then changed identities and built a successful career. Now she's being blackmailed and is pleading for her younger cousin to help her out. Maybe it's the expenses-paid trip with her daughter Caron to Acapulco that gets Claire to agree; more likely it's the snooping gene that cannot be ignored. Hess' fans will expect clever dialogue, and they won't be disappointed.

**The Gourmet Detective** is the debut novel from Peter King (St. Martin's, \$21.95) as well as the profession of this new series' protagonist and narrator. Formerly a chef, the Gourmet Detective is now a London consultant. He's hired by restaurants to locate sources for ingredients they need for special dishes, or by managers to help select an historically accurate menu. He's a researcher, basically, with lots of contacts, loads of knowledge, and a nose for snooping things out. This time, however, someone seems intent on adding a new ingredient to the recipe: murder. King's engaging hero and his own voluminous knowledge of food prove once again that murder and cuisine go together like bacon and eggs.

In **Last Chance**, Lia Matera's Willa Jansson is all dressed up in her corporate lawyer suit to show up promptly for her first day on the new job after months of unemployment. On the sidewalk she spots an old friend of her parents', a mythology professor, who is waving a gun and in danger of being arrested momentarily. Without a second thought Willa intervenes, and thus begins an adventure that will take them to a mountain cabin and beyond, into the center of a murder scene: the death of Arthur's young Kwakiutl assistant, a shaman. There's an inevitable quality to this—running from one danger into the arms of a greater one—and an eerie thread of spiritual truth-seeking that give the story weight. As an added bonus, readers get to spend quality time with the witty and wry Willa. (Simon & Schuster, \$21)

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AH Oct '96

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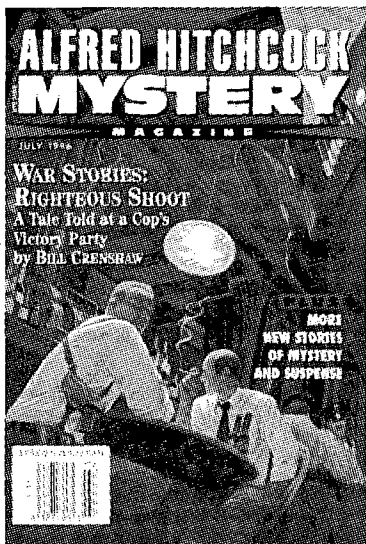
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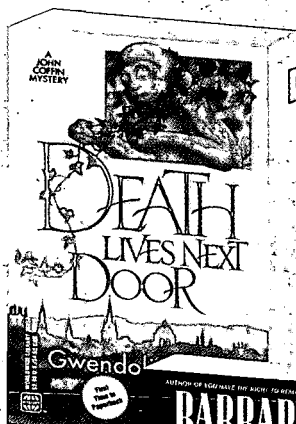
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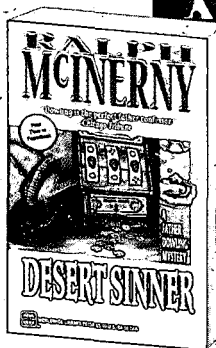
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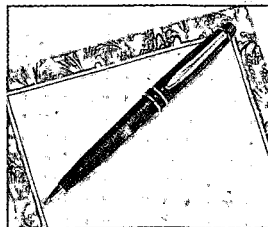
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